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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEOWULF:
MONSTERS AND HEROES IN THE NAMED LANDS OF THE NORTH

BY

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Wille cweðan þanke ge:

to the friends who introduced me to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien,

through whom I discovered my love of the Anglo-Saxons;

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who made my college education possible;

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Beoð ge halan!

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEOWULF	
I. The Danes: Something Rotten in the State of Denmark?	14
II. Finnsburg: Untangling the <i>Freswæl</i>	47
III. The Weder-Forecast: Cloudy with a Chance of Swedes	56
IV. The Peace-Weavers: Caught in the Web of Fate	72
CONCLUSION	
Beowulf is Min Nama	103
WORKS SITED	106

Introduction: Beowulf, the Monsters and the North

HWÆT, we Gar-Dena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon
(*Beowulf* 1-3).

Summary of the Poem

“Listen! We of the Spear-Danes have heard of the glory of the kings of the people, in years gone by, how the heroes did deeds of valor.”¹ Thus begins the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, and it opens with the history of the ruling family of Denmark, from its founder Scyld Scyfing to the current king Hrothgar. In his youth, Hrothgar was a mighty ruler, building the great hall Heorot, and winning renown. However, in his old age, his kingdom and hall are ravaged by the monster Grendel. It is news of Grendel that brings our hero, Beowulf the Geat, to Heorot, vowing to kill the monster. He does so.

There is a celebratory feast, and tales of Sigmund the dragon slayer are told, as is the tragic story of the slaughter at Finnsburg. Hrothgar’s queen gives Beowulf gifts, and the company goes to bed, only to be attacked again, this time by Grendel’s avenging mother. Beowulf vows to kill her as well, descending into her underwater lair to accomplish this feat. After his triumphant return, there is a second feast and further gift giving, though instead of songs there are speeches from Hrothgar and Wealtheow concerning good kingship and politics. The next day, Beowulf and his companions return to Geatland.

When Beowulf reaches his home, he recounts his adventures to his uncle King Hygelac, including his opinions on the impending marriage of Hrothgar’s daughter to one

¹ All passages of *Beowulf* come from Klaeber, translations are my own.

of the Danish King's former enemies. Beowulf and Hygelac exchange great gifts, and then the poet whisks through the fall of Hygelac, the brief rule of his son Heardred, and Beowulf's fifty-year reign to bring us to the dragon. A thief has stolen a cup from the dragon's hoard, and the dragon has attacked Beowulf's kingdom in retribution. Beowulf takes up arms, and then the poet backtracks to Hygelac's death in battle, Hygd's original offer of the throne to Beowulf, his refusal, the brief reign of Heardred who also dies in battle, and Beowulf's ascension to the throne. Back in the present, Beowulf and his companions set out to fight the dragon, and Beowulf reminisces about his childhood, the sorrows of his grandfather King Haethcyn and the reign and fall of Hygelac. He then vows to destroy the dragon, and orders his men to remain behind as he does battle. Beowulf fights the dragon, aided by his kinsman Wiglaf, but although they kill the dragon, Beowulf is mortally wounded. He dies gazing upon the dragon's hoard, and his people are left to mourn him and contemplate their impending doom. The poem ends with Beowulf's funeral pyre and the praises of his thanes.

The Manuscript and the Poem

Beowulf is found in the *Nowell Codex*, created around the year 1000 and recorded by two scribes (creatively called Scribe A and Scribe B) (Klaeber xxvii). However theories on the origin of the unknown author (or authors) and date of the poem's actual composition range from the late 600s to 1000 and over most parts of Anglo-Saxon England (clxii-iii).

Thesis of Unity

Scholars have examined *Beowulf* and been perplexed by the blend of serious history and equally serious monsters. Leah Smith, a colleague of mine, once described the argument thus: “Is [*Beowulf*] a fantastical poem with realistic elements or a realistic poem with fantastical elements?”(personal communication, Fall 2010). In this one sentence, she deftly summed up one of the biggest arguments in *Beowulf* scholarship. Before J.R.R. Tolkien’s influential essay “The Monsters and the Critics,” written in the early 1930s, scholars focused primarily on the historical nature of the *Beowulf* poem. After “The Monsters and the Critics,” and Tolkien’s suggestion that we should also study the monsters, subsequent scholars began to shift their views towards the other extreme and have focused increasingly on the monsters.² The trend seems to be that we must choose between history and monsters and devalue whichever we reject. Also wrapped up in this debate is the issue of the “digressions” – and whether or not they contribute to the meaning of the story, or if they are, as their name suggests, merely digressive.

In answer to these questions, I would argue that we do not have to choose between the historical and the mythical, nor should we. By concentrating either on the monsters or the historical aspects to the exclusion of the other, the poem loses many of its layers of complexity and is reduced to a history or a fairy tale, when it is so much more. That is not to say that histories or fairy tales cannot be complex in their own rights, but the *Beowulf* poet could have easily chosen to write either a monster story or a history and still have had a good tale. However, he chose to include hundreds of lines of historical material woven around the monster fights, which seems foolish to ignore. As Tolkien said, “there was room for myth and heroic legend, and for blends of these” (*Finn* 16).

² This is an oversimplification, but the general trend has shifted significantly in favor of the monsters.

My argument in this thesis is that the historical aspects of the poem are necessary in setting up the fights if we wish to understand them thoroughly: I would suggest that *Beowulf* is a mythical history, which means that history and myth are intertwined, so there is no reason not to have a hero of the mythical type who can perform feats of superhuman strength and fight mythical monsters. If the slaying of monsters give Beowulf the status of Sigmund and other heroes of legend, the history behind the life of *Beowulf* lends the poem a greater gravitas as it sets the remarkable life of one man against the backdrop of the histories of the great Scandinavian kingdoms and heroes that, in this poem at least, are effected by the life of the hero. There is a distinction between the epic of monsters and the epic of Ingeld and his Heathobards, or Hrothulf and his Danes, but neither one is intrinsically better than the other.

Because the majority of the aforementioned historical sections are contained within these supposedly digressive passages, we must also consider the “digressions.” As with the matter of the history and the monsters being equally important, it is my belief that the “digressions” are not, in fact, digressions, but rather elements of a single story that are perhaps told out of order or non-essential, but which are still relevant to the overall work. The “digressions” bring both an added element of reality – the peoples in the story have tales of their own, and have heard of or experienced historical events – and an additional element of the mythic or epic in the cases of Sigmund and other traditionally heroic elements which I will discuss later.³ Through this seeming tangle of the mythic and historic runs the life of our hero, Beowulf. The histories, monsters and digressions all revolve about the story of his rise and fall, creating order out of seeming

³ Although I object to the term “digression,” because it is the standard terminology I thought it best to continue to call them digressions for the sake of clarity.

chaos. The end result of the blending of these elements is a unified and tightly woven tale meant to be received as a single work, whether or not the poet was drawing on multiple sources or multiple genres, or even if it was written by multiple authors. The interlacing of realistic and fantastical elements are mutually important to what makes *Beowulf* such a rich text.

The Life and Times of Beowulf

In order to properly frame the project on which I am embarking, it is necessary to define precisely what I mean by the digressions. In general, *Beowulf* as a whole is seen to be about the hero Beowulf, his life, his deeds, and his death. Everything else is superfluous – a digression. However, I would argue that all the digressions deal with events and people with which Beowulf was in direct contact, or that they highlight certain important themes or events which do have an impact on the story and its interpretation. Thus, instead of viewing *Beowulf* as the story of a specific hero, and everything that is not obviously essential to that story as a “digression,” it would be more useful to think of the poem as a story about the life and times of Beowulf, in which the historical context contributes as much meaning and material to the story as the monster fights and the fifty-year reign.

The digressions are as follows:

1. The Creation Song (lines 90-98)
2. Grendel and the Race of Cain (lines 102-114)
3. “The Fight at Finnsburg” (lines 1068-1159)
4. The Giant Hilt (lines 1557-62)
5. Heremod (lines 898-913b, 1709b-22a)
6. Hrothgar's Sermon (lines 1687-1768)
7. Modthryth and Offa (lines 1931b-62)
8. Beowulf's prophecy about Freawaru (lines 2020-69)
9. "Father's Lament" (lines 2444-2462)

10. Hrethel's story (lines 2430-2443)
11. "The Father's Lament" (lines. 2444-2462)
12. The origin of Wiglaf's sword (lines 2609-2624)
13. "The Lay of the Last Survivor" (lines 2247-2266)
14. The Swedish Wars (lines 2913-2998)
15. "Messenger's Prophecy" (lines 3014-3027)

In the following pages, I will briefly outline what I believe to be the purpose of each digression but will save deeper analysis for their individual chapters.

If the poet of *Beowulf* was indeed Christian (and I believe he was), the Creation Song and the advent of Grendel, of the kin of Cain, are what one might expect in such a narrative.⁴ Having set Heorot up as a beacon of light, and Hrothgar as a worthy king, it is not surprising that the marauding, monstrous antagonist would be portrayed as the enemy of God. And if Grendel were the enemy of God, and some sort of demon or devil creature, it does not seem to be much of a stretch that he would find religious songs hateful.

The Finnsburg Episode can be interpreted as warning about and contemplation of the wisdom of putting faith in marriage alliances as a means of ending blood feuds, as well as a warning about Freawaru's fate, only to be fully explained several hundred lines later. In this way, the audience already has a framework into which the Freawaru story fits. Similarly, the Heremod sections provide both a warning for Beowulf and a sharp contrast to Hrothgar. In Beowulf's case Heremod is a cautionary tale about pride coming before a fall – he ought to heed the warning and avoid becoming too proud of his great deeds. In Hrothgar's case, there is the comparison of the giving of wealth; Heremod was stingy and stopped giving his followers gifts, whereas Hrothgar, though no longer as

⁴ See Klaeber lxvii-lxxix for a thorough discussion of the Christian and pagan aspects of the poem.

mighty a king as he once was, bestows rewards lavishly, as we see in his gift giving to Beowulf.

As for Hrothgar's sermon to Beowulf, coming as it does together with the passage about Heremod's pride and niggardly behavior, I would argue that this speech is not far out of character with the rest of the poem, especially as Hrothgar stands here as the advising father figure to Beowulf whom he had earlier wished to adopt. It is as if, being denied the chance to formally acknowledge Beowulf as his adoptive son, he is giving him the closest thing: fatherly advice. Moreover, given the presence of Hrothgar's earlier moralizing thanks for deliverance from Grendel's attacks, and his tendency toward long speeches, it does not seem surprising that his final parting gift to Beowulf would be one part mirror of princes and one part personal history.

Once Beowulf returns to his homeland, his uncle's queen Hygd is described, and Modthryth is presented as all the things Hygd is not. Hygd is generous in her gift giving, and though young, bears herself as she should. Modthryth, on the other hand, dealt death out to her retainers as liberally as Hygd gave gifts, and did so until she was "tamed" by King Offa. There is also a brief job description, as it were, for the peace-weaver or treaty wife. If I am correct that the *Beowulf* poet uses historical or mythic stories to describe his characters by showing what they are not in these supposedly digressive passages, then this passage fits the pattern.

The next digression, often titled "The Father's Lament" is placed after the story of Hygelac's family, and the accidental (or otherwise) kinslaying that occurred when Hygelac's eldest brother Herebeald was killed by their brother Haethcyn. This digression is more of an introspective commentary on the grief and dilemma of Hrethel, their father,

demonstrating by an extended simile the emotions Hrethel felt when faced by the death of one son at the hand of another. After so many instances where direct description of the emotions and characteristics of characters, I am inclined to say that these digressions are not so much digressions as they are a stylistic choice made by the author to give greater insight into his characters.

The “Lay of the Last Survivor” is again, an introspective piece that attempts to give insight into the character who created the barrow of treasures which the dragon took over, and in a way, it is a foreshadowing of the very end of the poem. Beowulf, for all his great deeds, will eventually come to nothing but a memory of bygone days, and in light of what the other Geats fear, the line “bealocwealm hafað fela feorhcynna forð onsended” (2265b-6)⁵ seems chillingly prophetic. In fact, there is a direct link between the last survivor and Beowulf: the heaped treasure of a dead ruler. “The Messenger’s Prophecy” is essentially one long “Lay of the Last Survivor,” extended to include all of the Geats both in the grief and in the doom, the beasts of battle hinting at many deaths to come. Even more ominously, the poet tells us that the messenger “ne leag fela wyrda ne worda” (3029b-30a),⁶ so doom is coming for the Geats, as both “The Lay of the Last Survivor” and “The Messenger’s Prophecy” foretell.

Perhaps the order in which the poet presents the feud between the Geats and Swedes is not the most graceful way of arranging the story, but the events of the supposed digressions about the Swedish Wars do still directly relate to Beowulf’s own life, events that personally affected him and the tale: after all, they are the events that lead to his kingship. The last third or so of the story would not have occurred without the

⁵ “Baleful death has sent forth many of the race of men.”

⁶ “Did not lie much in fact or word.”

wars, and that fact alone warrants their inclusion. Therefore, “digressions” such as the Freawaru and Ingeld incident, the Swedish Wars, and Hrethel’s story are all relevant elements, merely told out of order. That leaves us with the Creation Song, the Finnsburg Episode, Hrothgar’s Sermon, the Father’s Lament, the origin of Wiglaf’s sword, “The Lay of the Last Survivor” and the last prophesy at the end of the poem. All in all, the “digressions” serve as a means for the poet to tell us more about the characters and to foreshadow future events, either explicitly or implicitly. Perhaps they are not absolutely essential pieces of information, but they give an added emotional or historical richness and depth to the story, and highlight specific themes.

Like the supposed digressions, some have viewed the monsters in *Beowulf* as unfortunate, or even unnecessary aspects of the poem. However, they too are also central to the story, and as with the digressions, it is a mistake to undervalue them as W.P. Ker did when he complained that *Beowulf* had “this radical defect, a disproportion that puts irrelevancies (i.e. the monsters) in the centre and the serious things (i.e. the history) on the outer edges” (253). A hero fighting monsters or mythical creatures is a trope, after all. Hercules fights the Nemean Lion and Cerberus among others, Odysseus fights the Cyclops, Sigmund kills Fáfnir, Viðar will tear apart the wolf Fenrir, and Thor will kill the Midgard Serpent; it is simply the way such stories occur. Deeds of this sort prove the greatness and worth of the hero and set the hero above the common man, so why should *Beowulf* be any different.

I am certainly not alone in my belief that monsters are important, though I am skeptical of an interpretation that says that because they are a commentary on us in some way, the monsters have an additional role to play beyond that of a fearsome foe for the

hero to best. Regardless, the monster fights do not spring up from a vacuum. Rather they arise from the groundwork and background of the history and culture of the North. If you remove the historical elements, any explanation for Grendel's first coming to Heorot is purely based on generalities and is specific to no time or place. The historical framework suggests that something was amiss in Heorot, possibly kin-killing of some kind. The alignment of Grendel with Cain would seem to be one indicating that the punishment here fits the crime.

In the case of Grendel's mother, there are several possible interpretations, but I would argue that she is an embodiment of the system of the blood feud, and perhaps even a critique of the culture, because, to ever be truly over, a blood feud requires the extermination of an entire house, down to the women and children. In order to see this pattern and possible critique, however, one must understand the significance and the prevalence of the feud in northern culture. It might be well to remember that this poem is about the same men who people the Norse sagas, where family feuds have repeatedly destroyed entire peoples. However, one does not even have to look to the Norse sagas to see the destructive nature of such feuding. Within *Beowulf* itself, we see the feuds between the Danes and Frisians in the past, and the Danes and the Heathobards in the future; we see it in the Swedish Wars, and we either see or are told of the devastation feuds leave behind, both at the personal scale and at the national scale.

Beowulf's fight with the dragon is somewhat different because Beowulf has done nothing to deserve this chiefest and greatest of all calamities. He has lived his entire life in perfect obedience to all the rules of his culture,⁷ he has been a good thane, both repaying his father's debts to Hrothgar, and fulfilling his oaths to Hygelac. He has

⁷ See Michael Drout's "Blood and Deeds" pp. 212, 215, and 224.

avenged the deaths of both Hygelac and his son, and ruled the kingdom as the next of kin for fifty years. We also know that after the resolution of the Swedish Wars, those fifty years have been largely peaceful. Still, the dragon comes, and Beowulf fights it *in his old age*, because he thinks it is the right thing to do. The dragon is, if you will, the hurricane that no one did anything to deserve, but which still devastated the entire region.

Additionally, perhaps the poet is using the dragon fight to demonstrate further issues with the heroic code of a warrior and how it conflicts with the practical and political role of a king. From the standpoint of a hero such as Beowulf was in his youth, risking his life in single combat against a fearsome monster is expected and admired. But Beowulf is no longer young, and he ought to be considering not only what is best for his kingdom at the moment, but also what will be best for it once he dies.

All these things being said about critiques of society, I think that the poet is not so much criticizing his culture as showing a keen awareness of both the good and the bad encompassed by it. There is no sense of judgment about the use to which Hrothgar puts his wealth, nor of companions gathered in a hall to feast, nor even of Beowulf's boasting and heroic deeds. They are what they are, glorious and good – at least before the fight with the dragon. But there is also a sense of resigned fatalism when it comes to the kin-killing, the lives of peace-weavers and alliances between enemy peoples, a recognition that they do not work in reality as well as one might wish. However, lest we be overwhelmed by said fatalism, the poet closes by saying that although Beowulf may have failed in his last adventure, he will be remembered, for men say: “þæt he wære wyruldcniga manna mildust ond monðwærust, leodum liðost ond lofgeornost” (lines

3180-2).⁸ Indeed, here we are, more than fifteen hundred years after his death, still remembering his life. I think it is no mistake that the poem opens and closes with the praise of the glory of kings in years gone by.

In my thesis, I will thoroughly explore the history, monsters and digressions of *Beowulf*, discussing how each one gives us a fuller picture of the work, and how they contribute to a unified whole. I will cover these aspects of *Beowulf* as they are represented both within the poem and in other works such as the genealogies of the kings of Wessex, *Hrólfr's Saga Kraka*, Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*, and other sources. Through this approach I hope to present what we know about the people of *Beowulf*, how we know it and what we can theorize about. I also hope to suggest how to contextualize the information within the poem, and how this mythical hero and his fantastic feats fit into the histories and stories of the "named lands of the North" (Tolkien, *Monsters* 17).

Chapters

In Chapter One, I will focus on the historical Danish characters, their analogues in other texts, and their places in history, concentrating especially on the issue of Hrothulf's supposed usurpation of Hrothgar's son Hrethric, and on the order of succession of Heremod, Hoc and Hnæf. Chapter Two deals with the Finnsburg Episode and *Fragment*, especially with the question of Jutish alliances, and the historicity of Hengest, teasing out what the primary sources say, and what can be discovered from our modern

⁸ "That he, the earthly king, was the most generous of men and the most gracious, the kindest to the people and most eager for glory."

understanding of events. In Chapter Three, I discuss Beowulf and the Geats, especially Hygelac and his raid, and the wars with Sweden. Chapter Four examines the women of *Beowulf* and their role as peace-weavers, dealing with the politics in which Wealhtheow, Freawaru, Hildeburh and Hygd especially find themselves, and the ways in the digressions containing the stories of Hildeburh, Modthryth and Freawaru relate to the main body of the text.

Primary Sources, Tables, and Charts

When possible, I have used the texts in their original languages and worked with my own translations. Professors Michael Drout and Joel Relihan have been most helpful in proofing my work – any remaining errors are, of course, my own. Likewise, all tables and charts included are my own, unless otherwise stated.

Chapter I: The Danes: Something Rotten in the State of Denmark?

Oft Scyld Scefing Sceaþena þreatum,
monegum mægþum medoetla ofteah,
egsode eorl, syððan ærest wearð
feasceaf funden. He þæs frofre gebad:
weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah,
oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gylðan. Þæt wæs god cyning
(*Beowulf* 4-11).⁹

The history of the kings and heroes of the Danes seems like such a natural place to open *Beowulf* – or would be if it was anything but an Old English poem about a Geatish hero. Leading, as they do, so smoothly into the depredations of Grendel, it is very easy to forget that nearly 200 of the poem’s opening lines are digressive if one considers anything not directly related to life of Beowulf to be so. If *Beowulf* is a poem about a hero and the monsters he fights, then there is no use for all the history with which the poet saddles us. However, as I mentioned before, I believe that the history provides a framework for the story of Beowulf’s life.

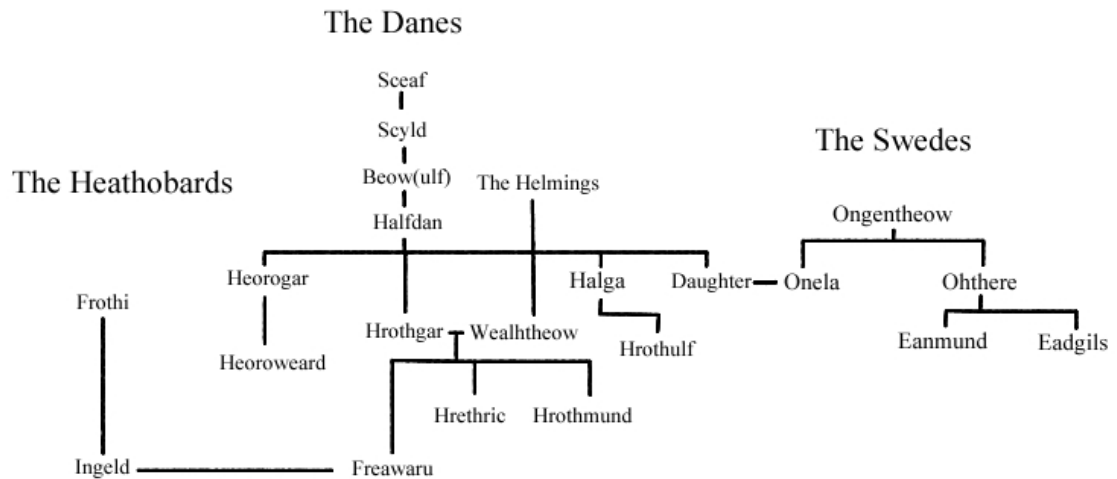
By beginning with the history of the Danes we are introduced immediately to one of the two central peoples around whom the story moves (the other being the Geats). This approach showcases the great deeds done by the fathers of Hrothgar, demonstrates just how mighty Hrothgar himself once was and how men flocked to his banner, which in turn brings a sense of perspective to Grendel’s attacks that consequently makes Beowulf’s success even more impressive. Though conversely, such an interpretation also means that Hrothgar’s nephew Hrothulf, a Scandinavian hero in his own right, might appear both mediocre and marginalized in comparison – an interesting position for the

⁹ “Oft Scyld Sceaþing deprived the companies of enemies of their hall-seats in many nations, terrified the Heruli/earls, he experienced this consolation: he waxed under the sky, thrived on glory, until everyone of the neighboring peoples over the whale-road must obey him, (and) pay tribute. That was a good king.”

“King Arthur of the north” (Chambers, *Beowulf* 16)! Moreover, while the lives and deeds of these men does provide something of a “backdrop” for the main action of Beowulf’s life, their stories, words and deeds often affect the thoughts and actions of the characters and alert the audience to themes and coming events. The people he meets have histories and futures of their own which shape Beowulf’s life just as much as his life shapes what we the audience see of theirs.

Scyld and Scaef

Table 1: Family Tree of the Danes, Swedes and Heathobards¹⁰



The very first piece of information the *Beowulf* poet gives us about Scyld is his prowess in battle, how he subdued all of his neighbors. We are told that he “oft ... sceaþena þreatum, monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah” (4-5).¹¹ This takeover of enemy halls is both a real and symbolic demonstration of victory, not only because Scyld

¹⁰ Family relationships as found in the text of *Beowulf*.

¹¹ “Often...deprived the companies of enemies in many nations of their hall-seats.”

would have had to win his way into them, probably facing their desperate last defences, but because the hall is in some ways the symbolic heart of a kingdom (Earl 51).

Then the poet goes on to say that Scyld “egsode eorl” (6a)¹² which presents both textual and historical problems as the phrase could mean a number of different things. Edward Sievers, and Frederick Klaeber both emended *eorl* to *eorlas*, although Klaeber did so reluctantly (112, n. 6). William Sewell, Eilert Ekwall and Ritchie Girvan all offer *eorle* as a suggestion (ibid), arguing that the word could be a corruption of the name Heruli – though this argument is not without problems of its own. As the editors of Klaeber point out, though it is *possible* that *eorl* is a “faulty reading” in which “*i*-stem pl. *eorle*” is “misconstrued as dative singular and changed to accusative,” “*Eorle* would not be the proper plural form of the name” (112, n. 6). However, in the defense of an argument for the reading of *eorl* as Heruli, I would point out that it is not the first time the scribe has mangled a name nearly past all recognition, and thus the reading of Heruli is not an impossibility.¹³ As the Heruli were, according to the historian Jordanus and possibly Procopius, a warlike race, known for their fearsome warriors, terrifying the Heruli would be significantly more impressive than terrifying any old noblemen. Furthermore, the Heruli are known to have been driven out of their homeland in Scandinavia by the Danes (Mierow 57) some time before the late 400s (146 n. 24). If Scyld had indeed driven out the Heruli, it would in fact have been a feat worth celebrating.

¹² “Terrified the earls/Heruli.”

¹³ In fact, according to Leonard Neidorf, there are at least 18 major errors including the rendering of “the might of the Merovingian” (*Merewioingas milts*) as *mere wio ingasmilts* (Neidorf 9), the conversion of Eomer into *geomor* (6), Cain to *camp* (ibid) and others. I am thankful to Mr. Neidorf for allowing me to read his forthcoming article.

Regardless of whether Scyld terrified the Heruli or simply the earls, the fact that he could expect tribute and obedience from “æghwylc ymbsettendra ofer hronrade” (9-10)¹⁴ demonstrates (if in vague and poetic terms) the extent of his power. However, it is hard to determine from the lines of *Beowulf* where exactly this kingdom was located. At first glance, the most logical assumption would be that he ruled somewhere in what we would consider Denmark. Looking again, however, the issue appears to be a little less clear. If Scyld did in fact rule the same areas of land which Beow,¹⁵ Hålfðan and Hrothgar ruled, why does the poet see the need to tell us that Beow ruled “Scedelandum in” (19b),¹⁶ and why is it only in Hrothgar’s time that Heorot is built? One explanation could be that the Danes migrated from modern day southern Sweden, with Scyld establishing power from there (and chasing out the Heruli). Beow then would have also lived in southern Sweden, which might possibly explain why Beow’s granddaughter was married to the Swedish king Onela (see Table 1). Such an interpretation would explain why Heorot as only built in Hrothgar’s time when the Danes had already been powerful for three generations.¹⁷

¹⁴ “Every one of the peoples over the whale-road.” “Whale-road” is a kenning for a large body of water (likely the sea, but also possibly a large lake), which is the road of a whale.

¹⁵ The *Beowulf* manuscript has *Beowulf* as the son of Scyld, but most scholars emend to *Beow*, and I shall do accordingly to avoid confusion.

¹⁶ “In southern Scandinavia.”

¹⁷ “Ða wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen,
wiges weorðmynd, þæt him his winemagas
georn hyrdon, oðð þæt seo geogoð geweox,
magodriht micel. Him on mod bearn
þæt healreced hatan wolde,
medoærn micel men gewyrcean
þon[n]e ylde bearn æfre gefrunon,
ond þær on innan eall gedælan
geongum ond ealdum swylc him God sealde,
buton folcscafe ond feorum gumena.
Ða ic wide gefrægn weorc gebannan
manigre mægþe geond þisne middangeard,
folcstede frætwan. Him on fyrste gelomp,
ædre mid yldum, þæt hit wearð eal gearo,

From the opening lines of the poem, the *Beowulf* poet appears to put Scyld at the head of the family tree of the Scyldings – which makes sense, as it is from Scyld that the name Scylding originates. We learn that Scyld Scaefing arrived as a baby or child in a boat accompanied by treasures, amongst the Danes who had been long suffering the lack of a lord. Once he grew up, he was a mighty war-lord as he “sceaþena þreatum, monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah” (lines 4b-5)¹⁸ and forced “æghwylc ymbsittendra” (9)¹⁹ to “hyran” (10b)²⁰ and to “gomban gyldan” (11a).²¹ We also learn that Scyld “egsode eorl[as]” (6a),²² that he had a son named Beow, and that when he died, he was given a ship burial and sent off to sea accompanied by treasures “as he selfa bæd” (29b),²³ and as he had been found when a child. “Pæt” we are told “wæs god cyning” (9b).²⁴ Of all the information that the *Beowulf* poet gives us about Scyld, the most important pieces are the leaderless state of the Danes before his arrival, his power over all the neighbouring lands, and the business with the earls or the Heruli – all of which will be discussed shortly.

healærna mæst; scop him Heort naman
se þe his wordes geweald wide hæfde” (lines 64-79).

[Then success in war was given to Hrothgar, the glory of the fight, that they of his wine-hall eagerly obeyed him, so that the young warriors, the great band of young followers, increased. It came into his mind that he wished to command a hall-building for himself, a greater mead-hall than the sons of men had heard of at any time, and there within, he (would) distribute to all young and old what God gave to him, except the public land and the lives of men. Then I heard that the work was commanded from many a nation throughout this middle-earth to make the dwelling place beautiful. It came to pass for him in time, speedily among the people of old, that it became all prepared, the greatest of hall-buildings; he assigned to it the name Heorot, he who held the power of his words far and wide.]

¹⁸ “Deprived the enemy companies in many nations of their hall-seats.”

¹⁹ “Every one of the neighboring peoples.”

²⁰ “Obey him.”

²¹ “Repay tribute.”

²² “Terrified the earls” or “the Heruli.”

²³ “As he himself requested.”

²⁴ “That was a good king.”

There are a number of other sources, some English, and some Scandinavian, which mention a Danish Scyld. Four of the six English sources – *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (AD 855), Asser’s *Life of Alfred* (893), *Æthelweard’s Chronicle* (ca. 1000) and the poem *Widsith* (ca. 600) – are Anglo-Saxon in origin and refer to Scyld and his (presumed) father Scaef. The other two English sources are William of Malmesbury’s *De Gestis Regnum Anglorum* from the 1100s, and A Chronicle Roll from the reign of Henry VI (ca. mid 1400s). As far as I can tell from Garmonsway’s notes, and from the similarities in the sources, Asser either knew of or used *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* when creating his *Life*, and that Æthelweard had one or both at his disposal when he wrote his. Similarly, William of Malmesbury likely had before him *Æthelweard’s Chronicle*, as the two documents are nearly identical, with the exception of the Latinized names in *De Gestis*, and the greater details included such as the reference to Jordanes the historian in William of Malmesbury’s work (Garmonsway 118-9).

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle contains a reference to both Scyld and Scaef in the family tree of the Kings of Wessex in which “Scyldwa” is the son of Heremod, who is in turn the great, great grandson of Scaef (Garmonsway 119). Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* lists “Beaw” as the son of “Sceldwea” who was in turn the son of Heremod (Garmonsway 118), and *Æthelweard’s Chronicle*²⁵ gives a similar order, “Beo, the son of Scyld, the son of Scef” (ibid) (though obviously with Scaef taking Heremod’s place), but gives the story of the foundling in the boat to Scaef rather than to Scyld (ibid). In *Widsith*, Scaef is briefly mentioned as “Scaefa Longbeardum” (line 32).²⁶ William of Malmesbury

²⁵ *Æthelweard’s Chronicle* is a Latin translation and elaboration on the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Miller, “Æthelweard”).

²⁶ “Scaef of the Longbeards.” Anglo-Saxon text is from Chambers’ edition, translation is my own. At this time the Lombards were a Germanic people living not far from the Angles and Saxons in continental

tells a very similar tale with additional geographical information – he says that “Boewius” was the son of “Sceldius” who was the son of Scaef. Scaef, he says, came to “a certain island of Germany called Scandza” (119) as a baby in an oar-less boat, and when he grew up “reigned in the town which was then called Sleswic, but is now...called Hedeby” in “the region...called ‘Old Anglia’” whence the Angles of England came (ibid). According to William, Scaef was also the son of “Heremodius” (ibid). *A Chronicle Roll* merely says “that Steldius [i.e.. Sceldius] was the first man to inhabit Germany” (ibid).

In addition to these six English sources, there are eight Scandinavian sources, some in Old Norse and some in Latin: *Langfeðgatal* (12th century), Sven Aageson’s *A Brief History of the Kings of Denmark* (ca. 1187), *Skjoldunga saga* (c. 1200), Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum* (ca. 1200), Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda* (c. 1220) (in both the prologue and in *Skáldskaparmál*), *Heimskringla*, part of the *Ynglinga saga* (c. 1223-35) (also by Sturluson), and also the chronicle *Annales Ryenses* (c. 1290). *Langfeðgatal*, like *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, puts Seskef (analogous to Scaef) in a family tree that traces back to Noah, including names such as Voden (Oden), Scealdna (possibly Scyld?) and Heremotr (Heremod) (Garmonsway 118-9).

Aageson relates that Skiold (Scyld) was the first king of the Danes, and was called thus because he was the shield of his kingdom (Garmonsway 120). *Skjoldunga saga*, which unfortunately only survives in an abstract by Arngrímur Jónsson, tells how the Danes are the descendants of Scioldus, son of Odinus/Othin. Skiold is assigned Denmark as his kingdom, and it is his name that gives the Danes the name “Skioldungs”

Europe (Chambers, *Beowulf* 116), and who, according to Paul the Deacon, author of *Historia Langobardorum* (c. 700s), originated in Scandinavia. They would later migrate southwards and settle in Italy (Paul the Deacon I.i).

(Scyldings) (ibid). Additionally, it is said that Scioldus sets up his stronghold at Hlethra (Leire)²⁷ in Sjælland, which is said to be in Juteland (ibid). Saxo's history calls "Scioldus" the son of "Lotherus" (ibid). Scioldus' people are also said to be named after him, and he restores the good name of his kingdom, which had been tarnished by his father (120-121). In the prologue of *The Prose Edda*, "Seskef" (Sceaf) is the great-great-great-grandfather of Heremoð who was the father of Skjaldun/Skjöldr, who was the father of Bjáf or Bjár (122), however in *Skáldskaparmál*, Skjöldr is said to be the son of Óðinn and the ancestor of the Skjöldungs. He is also the king of Denmark (which was then called Gotland) (ibid). The *Annales Ryenses* merely says that Steldius (Sceldius) was the first man to inhabit Germany (123).

These analogues span several different locations (England and Scandinavia), three languages (Old Norse, Latin and Anglo-Saxon), and roughly eight hundred years, so it is not surprising that there is some variation both amongst themselves and between them and *Beowulf*. But the similarities are more striking than the differences, and even when there is variation the story is seldom – if ever – changed beyond recognition. Moreover, there are multiple places where the outside sources agree with, or at least do not contradict, the information in *Beowulf*, and only a few where they do not (and often, in these places, the difference is in one text alone).

The biggest difference in the story of Scyld is his parentage. In *Beowulf*, he is presumably the son of Sceaf (*Scyld Sceafing*, line 4). Likewise, he is the son of Sceaf in William of Malmesbury and in *Æthelweard's Chronicle*. However elsewhere he is the son of Heremod: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has "Scyldwa, the son of Heremod"

²⁷ Leire is generally thought to be the location of Heorot. For an in depth discussion see Niles, Christensen, and Osborn's *Beowulf and Lejre*. See also R.W. Chambers' *Beowulf*, 13-14.

(Garmonsway 118), *The Life of Alfred* has “Sceldwea, who was the son of Heremod” (ibid), the *Prose Edda* Prologue has “Heremoð, his son Skjaldun whom we call Skjöldr” (122), and *Langfeðgatal* has “Heremotr; Scealdna” (120). Incidentally, each of these Scylds has a son whose name corresponds in some way to Beow. Additionally, *Skjoldunga saga*, *Skáldskaparmál* and *Heimskringla* list Scyld as the son of Odinus or Óðinn, and *Annales Ryenses* gives Lothar as Skiold’s father (123). Such variation in Scyld’s parentage would seem to indicate that his true parentage is forgotten, a reasonable assumption if, in the original story, it was indeed Scyld who arrived by boat, unknown in a foreign land. However, *Beowulf* is the only tale that tells the story thus. The other boat references in *Æthelweard’s Chronicle* and in William of Malmesbury have Scaef as the one arriving in a boat, so either *Beowulf* has the story confused or the significantly later works have given the arrival to the wrong character. Thus in sweeping strokes, the poet creates a backdrop for the main action of the poem, leaving the audience to fill in the details, and to perhaps draw connections between outside stories and the action within *Beowulf*.

Beow, Halfdan, Heorogar and Halga

All that the *Beowulf* poet tells us of Beow son of Scyld is that he was “leof leodcyning longe þrage” (line 54),²⁸ that he ruled in southern Scandinavia (19b), and that he was the father of Hálfðan (57a). The analogues are not of much help either outside of the aforementioned chronicles and histories, which consistently name him the son of Scyld. Garmonsway gives one other analogue, from the poem *Lokasenna* in the *Poetic Edda* where there is a character named Byggvir, “Freyr’s serving-man”. Byggvir trades

²⁸ “Beloved among the people for a long time.”

insults with Loki, and Garmonsway says that “since *bygg* means ‘barley’ in Norse, and so does *beow* in Anglo-Saxon, Byggvir may be the same person as Beow” (Garmonsway 123) – I find this connection doubtful, as the characters share no similarities beyond their names.

Of Hálfdan, the *Beowulf* poet tells us equally little – only that he “heold þenden lifde gamol ond guðreow” (57b-58a)²⁹ and that he had four children, “Heorogar ond Hroðgar ond Halga til” (61),³⁰ and a daughter who married Onela the Swede and whose name is lost in a textual lacuna (62).³¹ However, there are quite a few Scandinavian analogues for the character. With a few exceptions, Hálfdan is somehow related to or at least connected to variations of the character Frothi. Moreover, the stories of Hálfdan tend to fall into one of three categories: he either lives to a great age and has many children, he kills his brother to become king, or is killed by his brother and his brother becomes king.

In *Hyndluljóð* (date unknown), Hálfdan is described as, “the highest of Skjöldungs” (Garmonsway 124), an interesting turn of phrase given that the exact words the *Beowulf* poet chooses to characterize him are, “heah Healfdene” (57a).³² In *Langfeðgatal*, and *Annales Ryenses*, we are only given genealogies: *Langfeðgatal* lists “Frode the bold; Ingialdr...Halfdan, his brother” (124), and *Annales Ryenses*; “Haldanus; Ro; Haldean” (126). *Chronicon Lethrense* (c. 1170) appears to be entirely confused, as Helgi and Haldanus are called the sons of Ro (one of the Old Norse equivalents of Hrothgar), rather than the usual order in which Ro is the son of Hálfdan/Haldanus (125).

²⁹ “Ruled, ancient and fierce in battle, as long as he lived.”

³⁰ “Heorogar and Hrothgar and Halga also.”

³¹ “hyrde ic þæt [..... wæs On]elan cwen.” For further discussion on Onela’s queen, see Chapter 4.

³² “High Hálfdan.”

In *Skáldskaparmál*, Halfdan is called “the old” and had many sons, and “was a great warrior, and went far and wide among Baltic lands” (126). Aageson’s *A Brief History of the Kings of Denmark* (c.1187), Saxo and *Series Runica Regum Daniae Altera* (c. 1300s) all present Hálfðan as the brother to commit fratricide. In Aageson, Skiold’s son Haldan (Hálfðan) kills Frothi, his brother, and becomes king. In Saxo, Frotho I of Denmark had three sons, Haldanus, Roe, and Scatus, and Haldanus kills his brothers to become king. *Series Runica* depicts Frothe’s son Haldanus as the one who killed his brother for the throne.

Skjoldunga saga on the other hand, tells of how Frodo IV was slain by Svertingus, and how Halfdanus avenged his death and was rewarded by his half-brother Ingialldus, only to be later killed by him “in his greed to reign alone” (Garmonsway 125). *Hrólf’s saga kraka*, being focused a much narrower period of time, has a little more than the other sources by way of detail. In the saga, Hálfðan and Fróði are brothers and both kings. Hálfðan is “hýrr ok hægr, gæfr ok góðlyndr,”³³ Fróði on the other hand was “mesti ribbaldi” (3.1. 5-7).³⁴ Moreover, Hálfðan’s kingdom included Denmark, which made Fróði jealous, so he set Hálfðan’s hall on fire and killed him, driving Hálfðan’s sons, Hróarr and Helgi into hiding with their foster father.

It is hard to tell from Hálfðan’s brief appearance in *Beowulf* whether or not the *Beowulf* poet was aware of these other sources. However, there are two phrases in particular in the Anglo-Saxon which would seem to indicate that there was a story circulating in Scandinavia and in England with such a fixed form that characteristics survived un-changed for somewhere between three and six hundred years. Or, perhaps,

³³ “Friendly and gentle, mild and good-natured.” Old Norse text is from Jónsson’s edition, translations are my own.

³⁴ “Most savage.”

there was some greater connection between the works. The first of the phrases is “heah Healfdene” (57a), which as I mentioned earlier translates to “high Hálfðan” and corresponds closely with “Hálfðan...the highest of the Skjöldungs” from *Hyndluljóð* (Garmonsway 124). The second phrase is “gamol and guðreow” (58a)³⁵ describing Hálfðan and which is similar to his characterization in *Skáldskaparmál* where he is called “Hálfðan the Old” and “a great warrior” (Garmonsway 126). With the presence of such close similarities in the Old English and Scandinavian traditions, it seems unlikely that the *Beowulf* poet was entirely ignorant of the Scandinavian stories, even though they would not appear in manuscript form until the 1200s and later. If this familiarity with the Scandinavian sources was indeed present, then in only a few lines, the *Beowulf* poet is alluding to a whole other back-story separate from the tight narrative thread leading from Scyld to Hrothgar. Such a tie would, in turn, further connect *Beowulf* to the histories and legends of the North.

In the Scandinavian sources, Hrothgar’s generation too is tainted, as his brother Helga is usually said to have (unknowingly) married his daughter. While the incestuous relationship comes to a bad end, the offspring of that relationship is Hrólfr Kraki, arguably the greatest of the kings of Denmark. There are four pieces of information which follow Helga/Helgi/Helgo through the stories: the title Hunding’s Bane, the killing of Hǫðroddr (sometimes in battle, sometimes for revenge), a powerful wife (not always in the most positive way) and an incestuous relationship resulting in the birth of Hrólfr.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana (possibly 1000s), included in the *Poetic Edda* tells the story of Helga, who falls in love with a valkyrie Sigrún. Sigrún asks him to kill Hundingr and Hǫðroddr, which he does, earning him the title of *Hundingsbana*. *Helgakviða*

³⁵ “Ancient and fierce in battle.”

Hundingsbana the second (from possibly the tenth century), also in the *Poetic Edda* tells the same story, but says in addition that, “at Helgi’s birth norns and ravens foretold his prowess” (Garmonsway 142). *Grottasöngur* from the twelfth century confirms the incestuous birth of Hrólfr Kraki (ibid), and *Langfeðgatal* only mentions Helgi as a son of Halfdan. Aageson calls him Helghi, Halfdan’s heir, and mentions his career as a sea-raider and that he becomes known as the “Sea-King” (144).

The *Chronicon Lethrense* references Helgi as a sea-king and sea-raider, but then goes on to tell the story of Helgi and Thora (whom Helgi meets and sleeps with on a sea-raid) and their daughter Ursula. Helgi returns years later and, not knowing that she is his daughter, sleeps with Ursula and from this union is born Rolf (Hrólf/Hrothulf).

Sköldunga saga contains a slightly longer story in which Helgo is again a sea-raider who meets a beautiful (and powerful) woman named Olava the Rich, a countess in Saxland. He desires her, she tricks and humiliates him, and he then returns the favour and departs. Years later Helgo makes a raid on Sweden, steals away the queen, Yrsa, and they fall in love. Helgo’s brother Ro (Hrothgar) tells him not to marry her because he sees a family resemblance. Naturally, Helgo ignores him. Yrsa and Helgo have a son, Rolfo Krag (Hrólf Kraki). Olava then reveals Yrsa’s parentage and Yrsa leaves Helgo to return to the Swedish king after telling Helgo what happened. Helgo dies in battle five years later (Garmonsway 145).

Saxo tells a very similar story, though Olava has become Thora again, and her daughter is named Ursa instead of Yrsa or Ursula. There are a few elaborations: Helgo took “Iutiae Saxonibus...ius procurationemque” (47, 14),³⁶ and Helgo regains the title

³⁶ “The jurisdiction and administration of Juteland from the Saxons.” Latin text from Winkelhorn’s edition. Translations are my own.

“Hunding’s Bane” as well as killing Hothbroddus in revenge for his brother Roe’s murder at Hothbroddus’ hand. Though Saxo bitterly condemns the incestuous relationship between Ursa and Helgo, he says that, “genitus ex Ursa Rolpho ortus sui infamiam conspicuis probitatis operibus redemit, quorum eximium fulgorem omnis aevi memoria specioso laudum praeconio celebrat” (47, 22).³⁷ In Saxo’s version of events, Helgo’s later death may have been by his own hand (48, 24). *Heimskringla* follows the same general storyline as Saxo and *Skoldunga saga*, but it gives the name Aðgils (Eadgils) to the Swedish king – a name in fact, which also appears in *Beowulf*, though in a different generation (see Table 1, above). Additionally, Yrsa’s mother’s name is given as Álof of Saxland, now queen instead of countess (Garmonsway 147). Both *Annales Ryenses* and *Series Runica* have only brief mentions of Helgi, the former calling him “a zealous warrior” and relating that he killed Hothbrodus, King of Sweden, and the later naming him Helhe, brother of Ro, slayer of Hotbrod of Sweden, and gatherer of tribute from Thythistaland (ibid). The last source, *Hrólf’s saga kraka*, also tells the same story, though again much expanded upon, and the Queen of Saxony is here named Ólof.

If the *Beowulf* poet knew about any of these stories, he certainly glossed over the incest and the less-than-savoury aspects of Halga’s character. Perhaps the poet disliked, or felt uncomfortable with, them or simply assumed that his audience knew the stories and would need no additional help in identifying the father of Hrothulf. Or perhaps the incest was not introduced to the story until a later date.

³⁷ “Rolpho, the son of Ursa, redeemed the disgrace of his birth with clear works of goodness, whose extraordinary splendor the memory of every age extols in the glorious proclamation of their praises.”

Hrothgar

In comparison to the incest and kin-killing which follow the analogues of Hrothgar's relatives in the generations before and after his, Hrothgar's own life seems fairly bland – until the depredations of Grendel begin, and the possible threat of conflict with his nephew Hrothulf is discussed. In *Beowulf*, we see Hrothgar only as an old man, grown a trifle sentimental with age, but the poet is sure to tell us of the glories of his younger days. We hear of his prowess in battle, and how men from many nations came to aid in the building of Heorot (74-5). He marries Wealtheow,³⁸ has children, and is generally a good king. He and his warriors however, are powerless in the face of Grendel's attacks, and by his own admission, his elder brother Heorogar “wæs betera ðonne” him (469b).³⁹ In the action of the poem that we actually observe, Hrothgar demonstrates his generosity, both in treasure and in advice, but though he gives Beowulf good advice, some of his other decisions seem less than wise – such as his attempt to adopt Beowulf (see Chapter 4 for further discussion).

A majority of the religious references and discussions in *Beowulf* occur around, or are spoken by, Hrothgar. The creation song, which first so angers Grendel, is sung in newly built Heorot, and Hrothgar's sermon begins with an examination of the sword-hilt that Beowulf used to slay Grendel's mother, which shows the destruction of giants and their separation from God (*Dryhtne* and *Waldend* 1692a, 1693b). During Hrothgar's discussion of Heremod, the “mihtig God”⁴⁰ is mentioned twice (1716, 1725). The second time, Hrothgar talks about how a king's power is God-given, and how life will go badly for the king who is greedy and fails to be as generous to his men as God was to him

³⁸ For an in depth discussion on Wealtheow, see Chapter 4.

³⁹ “Was better than.”

⁴⁰ “Mighty God.”

(1724b-1753). Hrothgar also gives thanks to God that he has lived to see Grendel vanquished (1778b-1781). It could be that the poet, alarmed by the immorality of the rest of Hrothgar's family, fixed on Hrothgar as the king of the Danes for his poem and gave him so much prominence and religion to divert our attention from his less savory relatives.

The extant analogues tell a similar story of somewhat bland respectability and great military success. In *Widsith*, we are told that:

Hroþwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon lengegst
sibbe ætsomne suhtorfædran,
siþþan hy forwræcon Wicinga cynn
ond Ingeldes ord forbigdan,
forheowan æt Heorote Heaðo-Beardna þrym (lines 45-9).

[For the longest time, Hrothulf and Hrothgar, uncle and nephew united, held in friendship, when they drove forth the kin of the Wicings and humiliated the flower of Ingeld's men, cut down the host of the Heathobards at Heorot.]

In *Langfeðgatal*, Hrothgar is only mentioned as Hróar son of Hálfðan and brother of Helgi, and in the genealogy of *Annales Ryenses*, and as Ro. In *Chronicon Lethrense*, Ro is the son of Dan, and it is Dan not Ro who establishes Leire. Ro founds Roskild, named “in honour of himself” he lives “in such peace that no man drew a sword against him” (Garmonsway 128). The *Chronicon Lethrense* lists Helgi and Haldan as the sons of Ro, rather than Helgi and Ro as the sons of Haldan. *Series Runica* merely says that Ro was the son of Frothe, and that he built Roskilde. In *Skjoldunga saga*, when Ingialldus kills Halfðan, he marries Halfðan's widow, and marries his niece off to Sevilus, but Roas and Helgi go into hiding with their foster father. When they are grown, they avenge themselves on Ingialldus, and become the next kings of Denmark. Helgi becomes a sea-raider king, but Roas “live[s] quietly at home” and “marrie[s] the daughter of an English

King” (Garmonsway 129). Saxo also says that Hrothgar (here Roe) founded Roskilde, and describes him as “*brevi angustoque corpore*” (47, 4).⁴¹ In this version of the tale, Roe is killed by the Swedish king Hothbroddus, and Helgo avenges his death.

In Hrothgar’s case, *Hrólfs saga kraka* is the most extensive version of the story, but in its most basic form, it follows *Sköldunga saga* and Saxo fairly closely. After the death of Hálfðan at the hands of his brother Froði, his sons Helgi and Hróarr flee to their foster father Reginn who raises them. When they are older they accompany their brother-in-law Sævill and their sister Signý to Froði’s court, despite the warnings of both sister and brother-in-law. Once there, they are nearly betrayed to Froði but are saved by their sister’s quick thinking, and they escape once again. However, they return later and burn down the hall, with Froði in it, thus avenging their father’s death. However, their mother (who had been married to Froði after Hálfðan’s death) also gets killed in the blaze because she would not go out of the hall (16. 4. 22-4). Hróarr here marries the daughter of an Earl of Northumberland, where he ends up living (17. 5. 9-14).⁴² Hróarr then trades his right to the kingdom of Denmark for a priceless ring belonging to Helgi. They work out a deal which pleases them both well, but Signý talks her son Hrókr into thinking that he is entitled to the ring, and when Hróarr refuses to give it to him, he tosses it into the ocean. In revenge for this bad behavior on Hrókr’s part, Hróarr cuts off his feet. Hrókr then has *his* revenge by killing Hróarr in a vastly unfair battle, after which he takes over.

In *Bjarkarímur* (c. 1400), we find the same ring story, though this time Fróði and Hrærekr are the sons of Ingjaldr and the ring is given the name Svíagríss. In this version, both Helgi and Hróarr take revenge on Hrærekr, who is killed. However, Ingjaldr has a

⁴¹ “Short and slim.”

⁴² For further discussion, see Chapter 4 under Wealhtheow.

bastard son, Agnar, who recovers the ring and makes war, not on the brothers, but on Hrólfr Kraki. Agnar is killed by Hrólfr's champion Bøðvarr. This Hrókr or Hrærekr, here in both cases Hrólfr's cousin (though not Hrothgar's son), is analogous to Hrethric son of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow, which has led scholars to argue that Hrothulf had something to do with his death.

Hrothulf and Hrethric

Of all the Danish troubles hinted at by the *Beowulf* poet, the most difficult and discussed of them all is this problem of Hrothulf and his cousins. In *Beowulf* Hrothulf is a silent, deedless character. He is mentioned directly only twice; first when the poet says that:

Bugon þa to bence blædagande,
Fylle gefægon; fægere gebægon
Medoful manig magas þara
Swiðhicgende on sele þam hean,
Hroðgar ond Hroþulf. Heorot innan wæs
Freondum fyllend; nalles facenstafas
Peod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon (1013-19).

[Then the glorious ones sat down, rejoiced in the feast; those valiant kinsmen, Hrothgar and Hrothulf, they fittingly received many a mead-filled cup in the high hall. Heorot was filled with friends; then the people of the Scyldings did not perform treachery at all.]

He is mentioned again in Wealhtheow's speech, which as I will discuss in Chapter 4, is usually viewed to be ironic because of Wealhtheow's (supposedly misplaced) faith in Hrothulf's loyalty.

Now one possible explanation for Hrothulf's silence and apparent lack of deeds is that he was still quite young at the time of Beowulf's visit, though certainly old enough to sit with Hrothgar rather than with his younger cousins. Such a reading would be consistent, if we are to believe that the stories of Hrothulf and Halga follow that of their

analogues, because not only is Halga generally considered to be younger than Hrothgar, but also Yrsa is both Halga's daughter and wife, meaning that she would have had to be at least thirteen if not closer to sixteen or older when Hrothulf was born, likely making Hrothulf more the age Hrethric and Hrothmund rather than of Freawaru or Beowulf himself. Regardless of Hrothulf's parentage (which is not so much as hinted at in *Beowulf*), we are still left with the question of whether or not Hrothulf killed his cousins.

Instead of containing two fairly evenly divided camps in which one group of scholars argues that Hrothulf killed his cousins and another which argues he did not, I found few others besides Kemp Malone, Dorothy Whitelock, and Fredrick Klaeber who argue unreservedly in favour for viewing Hrothulf as a kin-killer. Kenneth Sisam, R.W. Chambers, Tom Shippey and others are much more cautious in their verdicts, arguing that while it is certainly possible that Hrothulf did kill his cousins, such an outcome is not necessarily the *only* one.

Malone argues that the presence of Hrothgar and Hrothulf together is "an ominous picture to those that know what was to follow" ("Hrethric" 268). He also thinks that the Finnsburg episode is an "ironical commentary on the hall Heorot" (269), and wonders if the Hrothgar/Hrothulf/Hrethric story is "meant to be foreshadowed in the course of events at the hall of Finn, where uncle and nephew fight on opposite sides until each meets his doom, and where the hapless Queen Hildeburh must look on while husband, son and brother strive to do each other to death" (268-9). However, this interpretation is problematic if one considers the possibility that Hnæf and his nephew fell fighting on the

same side, as Tolkien suggests (*Finn* 159).⁴³ Later in the article, Malone says that “Hróarr [=Hroðgar] is almost uniformly made a victim of a close kinsman; and although in the monuments this kinsman is not Hrólf, in the *Grottasöngur*, the earliest and most authoritative source, Hrólf is clearly the murderer” (285). However, in *Grottasöngur* (i.e. *Grottasöngur*) the prophecy is about revenge on Fróði for the death of Hálfdan that goes as follows:

Mun Yrsu sonr,
niðr Halfdanar,
hefna Fróða;
sá mun hennar
heitinn verða
burr ok bróðir,
vitum báðar þat (stanza 22).⁴⁴

[Yrsa’s son, kinsman of Halfdan, shall avenge (himself) on Fróthi; he shall come to be called son and brother, we both know that!]

While we have indeed seen that Hróarr/Ro/Roas is generally killed by a close kinsman, the kinsman was always either the son of Ingialldus/Fróði, and thus Hróarr’s cousin, or Hróarr’s sister-son, and in three out of the four cases, Helgo/Helgi/Halga or Hrólf/Rolf/Hrothulf avenge his death. Thus even the analogues do not attribute Hrothgar’s death to Hrólf.

Whitelock argues that the *Beowulf* poet “expects his audience to know that [Heorot] was destined to see Hrothgar’s strife with his own son-in-law, and at last to perish in flames in a war between kinsfolk that put an end to the Scylding dynasty....The Scyldings were unaware of this disaster in store, but the poet meant his audience to

⁴³ Tolkien’s argument for such a reading stems the possibility that Finn’s son had been fostered by Hnæf, and that as the original visit to Finnsburg was “not an invasion, nor a sudden unlooked-for arrival, and almost certainly not originated as a trap,” and Hnæf could well have been bringing home Finn’s son (159).

⁴⁴ Text is from Jónsson’s edition, translations are my own.

remember it” (35). She goes on to say that, “to an audience that did not know that Hrothulf killed Hrethric, the whole section would be pointless; but an audience that did know, knew also that Hrethric did not lie unavenged” (36). To which she adds:

So, towards the end of the first part of the poem... he [the poet] has only to mention Heorowearð’s name – and he goes out of his way to do so – and the whole of the final act of the Scylding drama would leap into his audience’s minds, one of the most famous events in northern story, which gave rise to the Old Norse poem, the *Bjarkamál*, namely the slaying of Hrothulf by his cousin Heorowearð, in spite of a magnificent stand made by his followers (ibid).

Within the poem itself, there is nothing that points at betrayal by cousins without the help of outside sources. For instance, the comment about Heorowearð, of which Whitelock makes so much says only, “no ðy ær suna sinum syllan wolde, hwatum Heorowearde beah he him hold wære, breostgewædu” (2160-62a).⁴⁵ It certainly would be strange that Hrothgar would deny his nephew heirlooms that were his by right, but it would seem that it was Heorowearð’s own father Hiorogar who denied them to him in the first place. It could even be that Heorowearð was dead at the time that Hrothgar gave the heirlooms to Beowulf. I also do not think that it is enough of a cause to assume that the choice of gift giving would have anything to do with Heorowearð killing Hrothulf. Moreover, Hrothgar gave away heirlooms of his own as well, so it is not as if he was depriving Heorowearð any more than his own sons. Additionally, as I will shortly discuss, the relationships between Heorowearð, Hrothulf and Hrethric are definitely different in the Scandinavian analogues, which makes me hesitant to agree that these stories were precisely the ones the poet had in mind. For instance, though Hrothulf (Hrólf/Rolf/Rolfo etc...) becomes

⁴⁵ “He [Hiorogar] did not wish to give the breast-garments (mail coats) to his own son, valiant Heorowearð, however loyal he was to him.”

king eventually in every one of the analogues, there are none in which Hrothulf's character kills Hrothgar's and only one – Saxo's – in which Hrothulf kills Hrethric.

Because Hrólfr Kraki, Hrothulf's Scandinavian equivalent, was, as mentioned before, the King Arthur of the north, his character plays a much more substantial role in the sources than the other characters. Moreover, in addition to the sources we have already seen, Hrólfr appears in *Grottasöngur* (discussed above) (which Snorri Sturluson quotes in *Skáldskaparmál*), and also in a brief mention in *Landnámabók* (c.1330). As mentioned in the section on Hrothgar, Hrothulf appears in *Widsið* alongside his uncle. *Bjarkamál* (c. 950), which Garmonsway says, tells of “the last stand of King Hrólfr and his warriors when attacked at Leire” and which “survives only fragmentarily in three sources:” Saxo, *Skáldskaparmál* and *Heimskringla* (156). *Langfeðgatal*, as we have seen, only lists Rolfr in a genealogy. *Chronicon Lethrense* tells how Ursula marries Athislus of Sweden after Helgi's death, and how the daughter of Athislus and Ursula brings about Rolfr's death with her husband Hiarward (156-7). Aageson merely says that Rolf was very brave, and that he was killed at Lethra, “which at that time existed as a very famous royal residence, but is now hardly inhabited, being one of the humblest villages in the neighbourhood of the city of Roskilde” (58). After Rolf's death, his son Rokil (Hrethric!) is said to have ruled after him (207).

Skjöldunga saga gives an account of Rolfo's incestuous birth, and his early ascension to the throne. It also tells of how a man named Woggerus became one of his thanes, and swears to avenge Rolfo's death should he ever be killed. Rolf has two daughters, Driva and Scura, the former of whom marries Witsershus the Swede. Here we also see the famed warriors Bodvarus (who marries Scura) and the conflict between

Rolfo's sister and brother-in-law (Scullda and King Hervardus/Hiorvardus respectively). Rolfo and his warriors commit deeds of daring and display great cunning and generosity as each situation demands, and Queen Yrsa helps them take advantage of King Adilsus. As it does in the *Chronicon Lethrense*, Rolfo's end comes at the hands of his brother-in-law Hiorvardus, and he is avenged by Woggerus. Rærecus (Hrethric) appears here as the son of Ingialldus, and thus the cousin (and slayer) of Roas/Hrothgar (Garmonsway 207). Saxo tells the same story with slightly different names: Woggerus becomes Vigo; Adilsus becomes Athislus; and others. The battle between Hiartwarus and Rolfo is much extended, with the speeches and deeds of Rolfo's warriors, specifically Hialto, Rute and Biarco (Bodvarus). There is also an aside explaining how Rolfo killed Roricus/Hræreker/Hrethric who was a rather greedy and unpleasant character – and not, as far as I can tell, related to Rolfo. In the final battle, Rolfo and all his men save Vigo are killed, and Vigo avenges Rolfo's death by killing Hiartwarus. After Hiartwarus is killed by Vigo, the King of Denmark is Hotherus, who is in turn succeeded by his son Roricus who is the opposite of the first Roricus, being able to resist the temptation of avarice (210). Given the other analogues in which Roricus (Hrethric) is killed by Hróarr and/or Helgi, my best guess is that the first Roricus is the one who corresponds to Hrethric.

The *Annales Ryenses* tells only how Rolf Kraki, Helgi's son was killed at Leire, by his sister's husband Hiartwarus, along with his champions. Haki avenges Rolf's death. *Skáldskaparmál* recounts a tale that explains, "why gold is called 'Kraki's Seed'" (Garmonsway 177). The story is essentially the same as those related in *Skjöldunga saga* and the *Chronicon Lethrense*, where Vöggr (Viggo/Woggerus) vows to avenge Hrólf

should he ever need avenging and tells of the trip Hrólfr and his men take to see his mother and her husband, the Swedish Aðgils, and deeds of boldness and guile are performed. As the story is called *Hrólfs saga kraka*, it is not surprising that the longest source in which Hrólfr appears is this text. In essentials, the story is the same as the others but much expanded in detail. The difficulties with Hjörvarðr are there, as are the journey to Uppsala, King Aðils' resulting humiliation, Hrólfr's champions, and the final battle at Leire which resulted in the death of Hrólfr and his champions. However, in this version of the story, Hjörvarðr also is killed in battle, and Skuld, Hrólfr's half-sister, rules badly. As for Hrethric (here Hrókr), he is the son of Signý, and is, as I discussed above, talked into believing that he is entitled to the ring by his mother. He kills Hróarr and is killed himself by Helgi in revenge.

Bjarkarímur simply relates the part of the tale where Hrólfr meets Vöggr, and is the version of the Hrethric story in which Hroereker (Hrethric) throws the ring Svíagríss into the water, is maimed and dies, at the hands of Hróarr and Helgi. The reference to Hrólfr in *Landnámabók* is actually to someone breaking into Hrólfr's tomb and stealing his sword, and Hjalti's axe, but it seems that the shades of Bøðvarr and Hrólfr prevent the weapons from being removed (Garmonsway 206).

Because of the variations in the actions of Hrethric's character, and the multiple different ways in which he is or is not related to Hróarr, Helgi and Hrólfr, both in *Beowulf* and the Scandinavian analogues, it seems reasonable to explore other possibilities regarding the fates of Hrethric and Hrothulf. Perhaps Hrothulf *let* Hrethric rule, rather like Beowulf did for Heardred. The parallels are very close between those two stories

already, with mothers discussing inheritance with Beowulf,⁴⁶ the presence of an older and more experienced cousin, and the fact that the eventual fame of Hrothulf and of Beowulf entirely eclipses that of the sons of Hrothgar and Hygelac. Perhaps Wealhtheow was *right*, and Hrothulf *did* treat her sons with honor – after all, there are enough Danish wars to kill off Hrethric and Hrothmund without needing murderous cousins to do the job. Moreover, as Sisam points out, Hrothulf, “in all sources, early and late... is a character to be admired. He appears in the post-Conquest list of heroes popular among the English” and “Scandinavian traditions agree in making him the best and most glorious of early Danish kings” (36). Sisam goes on to say that in *Beowulf*, “nothing but praise of Hrothulf is expressed” which “is a strange way of presenting Hrothulf to an audience if they knew he was a traitor to his lord, a murderer of his helpless benefactor, a usurper of the throne” (36-7). Moreover, in Saxo, Hrethric’s character is so wretched that his death is seen to be one of Hrólfr’s good deeds. Furthermore, Sisam also points out that Wealhtheow’s request to Hrothulf that he “treat her sons as generously as he himself had been treated” could easily mean that “Hrothulf will govern after Hrothgar’s death, possibly as a senior ruler with Hrethric” (38), which would mean that Hrothulf treated his cousin(s) *exactly* the way he himself was treated.

In addition to the death of Hrethric at Hrothulf’s hands being found only in Saxo, the other piece of evidence which scholars usually cite in charges against Hrothulf are lines 1018b-19 which say, “nallas facenstafas þeod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon”⁴⁷ and lines 1165b-68b: “þær þa godan twegen sæton suhtergefæðeran; þa gyt wæs hiera sib

⁴⁶ See Chapter 4 for discussion of Wealhtheow and Hygd and their interactions with Beowulf and Hrothulf.

⁴⁷ “Meanwhile the people of the Scyldings performed no treacheries.”

ætgædere, æghwylc oðrum trywe.”⁴⁸ In the former, the lines could possibly refer to the approaching feud with Ingeld and the Heathobards and not to Hrothulf at all. Moreover, the lack of deeds of treachery is attributed to the Scyldings as a whole people (*Peod-Scyldingas*), not specifically to either Hrothgar or Hrothulf. An explanation for the second set of lines is weaker, but to my mind, no less tenuous than arguments for the treachery of Hrothulf. It could be that Hrothgar and Hrothulf were said to be together at the time because Hrothgar, though presented as quite old, still was king.

The Legacy of Heremod

When trying to establish a chronology of the early history of the Danes before Beowulf arrives in Denmark, the greatest difficulty is where to place Heremod and Hnæf, as the rest of the Danes follow in a logical order laid out for us by the poet. In *Beowulf*, Heremod is not the most positive of characters. He is described as “mid Eotenum wearð on feonda geweald forð forlacen, snude forsended” (902b-904a)⁴⁹ and “his leodum... to aldorcare” (906).⁵⁰ Later he “Ne wearð...Ar-Scyldingum; ...ac...to deaðcwalum Deniga leodum” (1709-12).⁵¹ If we accept that “quickly sent away” means something like “exiled” or at very least, “no longer ruling the Danes,” then we have an empty throne and a lord-less people, which leaves us with a number of possibilities. Perhaps originally, Heremod was not in fact Scyld’s father, but rather, Scyld arrived amongst the Danes after Heremod’s departure or exile, and only in later centuries it simply became assumed that because Scyld followed Heremod, he must have been Heremod’s son. Such an

⁴⁸ “There the good twain sat, uncle and nephew; there was then still their kinship together, each one true to the other.”

⁴⁹ “Seduced away in the power of the enemy with the Jutes, quickly sent away.”

⁵⁰ “As a great sorrow to his people.”

⁵¹ “Did not prove a source of honor for the Scyldings...but ...became destruction for the Danish people.”

explanation would account for both Scaef and Heremod being listed as Scyld's father.

There are other Old Norse sources that mention Heremod, in which he is represented as the son of Óðinn, but it is highly unlikely that it is the same character, as he shares none of the same connections to people or deeds (Garmonsway 116-7).

Hoc and Hnæf⁵²

Like Heremod, Hoc and Hnæf both appear to be rulers of the Danes before Scyld. Within *Beowulf* itself there is limited information – Hoc is only mentioned once in passing as the father of Hildeburh (“Hoces dohtor” 1076⁵³). He is therefore also Hnæf's father, because we know from context that the “Hnæf Scyldinga”⁵⁴ who should “in Freswæle fellan” (1069-70)⁵⁵ is (one of) the brother(s) lost by Hildeburh together with her son(s) (1074). Hnæf appears in the Anglo-Saxon *Finnsburg Fragment*,⁵⁶ and the names of Hoc and Hnæf appear in *Widsith* when Hnæf is called “Hnæf Hocingum” (Chambers, *Widsith* 197). However, none of these sources give us a firm idea of when in this period of history Hoc and Hnæf ruled.

A Rough History of the Danes

We know from the poet's method of narration that Scyld Scyging came to the throne of Denmark after a period during which the Danes were *aldorleas* (line 15b)⁵⁷. He was then a glorious king for a span of time long enough to have a grown son, but young

⁵² For Hoc's daughter Hildeburh, see Chapter 4.

⁵³ “Hoc's daughter.”

⁵⁴ “Hnæf of the Scyldings.”

⁵⁵ “Fall in the Frisian slaughter.”

⁵⁶ See Chapter 2 for discussion on both the Finnsburg Episode and *Fragment*.

⁵⁷ “Lordless.”

enough to still be *felahror* when he died (line 27a).⁵⁸ We also know that Scyld’s son Beow was succeeded by *his* son Hálfdan who in turn was Hrothgar’s father. So far, so good.

Knowing the order of these kings, is even possible to suggest tentative dates working backwards from the date of Hygelac’s raid (525 AD), as given by Gregory of Tours. Assuming that a generation is approximately 20 years and that Hygelac is of approximately the same generation as Beowulf’s father Ecgtheow, we can arrange the chronology thus:

Figure 1: Chronology of *Beowulf*⁵⁹

The Danes	The Jutes	Frisians/Franks
Heremod is a bad king		
Heremod is exiled and dies in Juteland		
King Hoc (ca. 390)		King Folcwald
	The Jutish kingdom falls apart	
←		→
Some Jutes with the Danes		Some Jutes with the Frisians
Hnæf		Finn (Chlodio and/or Merovech)
Hildeburh marries Finn		Finn marries Hildeburh
Hildeburh and Finn have a son or sons		Finn and Hildeburh have a son or sons
Finn's son to Hnæf's court		Finn's son to Hnæf's court
<i>Somewhere between twelve and twenty years pass</i>		
Hnæf, Hengest and possibly Hildeburh's son go to Finnsburg (Clodio supposedly dies)		
The Fight at Finnsburg. Hnæf dead, Hildeburh's sons dead, funeral pyre, Hengest and Finn make temporary peace.		
Uneasy winter, spring comes, the Jutes and the Danes break the treaty, Finn is killed.		
Hildeburh is returned to the Danes		
	Hengest to England? (449 AD)	

⁵⁸ “Vigorous.”

⁵⁹ Information on the Danes, Swedes, Geats, Heathobards and Frisians summarized from *Beowulf*, dates and movements of Hengest after Finnsburg from Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, dates and kings of the Merovingians from Gregory of Tours’ *History of the Franks*.

The Danes	The Jutes	The Franks	The Geats	The Swedes
Scyld arrives as a founding				
and grows up	455 Hengest defeats Vortigern	456 Merovech dies		
Scyld Sceafig King of the Danes	457 Hengest and Æsc take Kent			
Scyld defeats the Heruli				
<i>Probably twenty to thirty years pass</i>	565 Hengest wins victory at Wipped's Feet		Swerting	
Scyld dies and Beow succeeds him (c. 475)		481 Childeric dies		
	488 Æsc King of Kent (likely that Hengest is dead)	Clovis defeats Roman Syagrius in 486		
Halfdan succeeds Beow	The Heathobards	496 Clovis is converted to Christianity by his wife		
Heorogar, Hrothgar, Halga Yrsa (?)	Froði		Hrethel	Ongentheow
Yrsa marries Onela			Herebald, Hæthcyn, sister, Hygelac	Onela, Ohthere
Hrothgar marries Wealhtheow			Sister marries Ecgtheow	Onela marries Yrsa
Heorowearð, Hrothulf, Freawaru	Ingeld		Beowulf born	
Heorogar killed, Halfdan dies at some point (ca. 490)				Weohstan
Hrothgar pays wergild to Wulfings for Ecgtheow			Ecgtheow kills Heatholaf the Wulfing and goes to <i>Seven years pass since Beowulf's birth.</i>	
Feud with the Heathobards	Feud with the Danes		Hrethel 'adopts' Beowulf	

The Danes	The Heathobards	The Franks	The Geats	The Swedes
Freawaru			Herebald killed by Hæthcyn	
Builds Heorot			Hrethel dies	
Grendel comes			Hæthcyn killed by Ongentheow. Hygelac becomes king. More wars with Swedes. Eofor kills Ongentheow. Hygelac gives him his daughter in marriage	
<i>Twelve years pass</i>				
Hrethric and Hrothmund			Hygelac marries Hygd	
			Heardred born	
Freawaru to marry Ingeld to end feud		511 Clovis dies, succeeded by Childebert I (d. 558), Chlodomer (d. 524), Lothar I (d. 561) and Theoderic (d. 533)	Beowulf swims with Brecca	
Beowulf the Geat arrives (c. 512?)			Beowulf to Denmark	
Beowulf kills Grendel and Grendel's mother			Beowulf returns	
Freawaru marries Ingeld. At wedding feast, one of Ingeld's men kills one of the Danes.				
Ingeld falls out of love with Freawaru				
Heorot attacked by Ingeld, Hrothgar and Hrothulf defend it, but and though it is burned down, the Danes win, and Ingeld is killed.		524 Chlodomer dies		
		Hygelac's Raid against Franks and Frisians, Hugas and Hetware Hygelac killed, Beowulf kills Dayraven the Frank. Theudebert son of Theoderic I leads Franks/Frisians (525 AD)		
Hrethric			Beowulf refuses the throne, Heardred becomes king	
Hrothulf/Hroif Kraki				Eanmund and Eadgils rebell against Onela

Having reached Scyld and that period in which the Danes were *aldorleas*, we find another convenient date. According to early Anglo-Saxon Historian the Venerable Bede, a Germanic leader named Hengest arrived in England in 449 AD. Such a date paired with that name is tantalizing because that progression of dating would put Hnæf's death within a few years of that date, and providing an excellent reason for the Danes' lack of a lord, and the succession of a king who arrived in a boat and was not of the original dynastic line.⁶⁰ However, there is still the matter of Heremod. There are several ways in which this difficulty may be resolved: 1) either Heremod comes before Hoc and Hnæf (and the analogues in which Heremod appears as Scyld's father are entirely wrong); 2) Heremod is before Scyld; Hoc and Hnæf are contemporaries of Hálfðan; 3) Heremod, Hoc and Hnæf are all from parallel Danish families who are contemporaries of Hálfðan; or 4) perhaps Heremod is the son of Hoc and elder brother of Hnæf who does not go to Finnsburg but shortly afterwards is exiled, thus leaving the Danes without a ruler, and likely still reeling from the shock of the slaughter at Finnsburg.

In the cases of both Hnæf and Heremod, the biggest problem in placing them in a chronology before Scyld is that they are both referred to as *Scylding*: Hnæf is "Hnæf Scylding" (1069b),⁶¹ his people are called "Here-Scyldinga" (1108b),⁶² and "sceotend Scyldinga" (1154a),⁶³ Heremod is said to rule "eþel Scyldinga" (913a),⁶⁴ and is not a source of "Ar-Scyldings" (1710b).⁶⁵ The problem is to explain why the poet would refer to Hnæf and Heremod as Scyldings if they both ruled before Scyld from whom the name

⁶⁰ Hnæf's death must necessarily come shortly before Hngest's arrival in England, because Hengest must have departed thence only after the events at Finnsburg. Thus, the Danes, because of Hnæf's death, would have been lordless at that time as well.

⁶¹ "Hnæf of the Scyldings."

⁶² "Battle-Scyldings."

⁶³ "The warriors of the Scyldings."

⁶⁴ "The home of the Scyldings."

⁶⁵ "Honour for the Syldings."

originated. The consensus answer is, as Klaeber said, that the poet is using “*Scyldingas* ... in the wider sense ‘Danes,’ without regard to the Scyld dynasty” (lvii). The poet could be doing so because the name Scylding was so synonymous with Dane that he did not stop to think about the anachronism he was employing. Tolkien argues that the use of *Scylding* for Heremod, “could, from the point of view of the author of *Beowulf* and his contemporaries, be defended if the true *Scyldingas* in fact held the same realm and subjects as the older line” (*Finn* 54). He also suggests that the use of *Scylding* is “due to ‘epic’ or loose anachronistic use... which had come to be so often used as an equivalent of ‘Danes’ that it might be used carelessly of them at any period or in any branch” (ibid). Under any other circumstances, I might suggest that the use of Scylding was for alliterative purposes, but except for “sceotend Scyldinga” in line 1154a,⁶⁶ none of the other instances of Scylding together with Hnæf or Heremod are used to alliterate. Moreover, the poet can and does use “Dane” in the Finnsburg passage, so there is no reason for him *not* to use Dane and *to* use Scylding. The last option is that we ought to take the poet at his word. If he says Hnæf and Heremod were Scyldings, then they somehow fit in to the succession of the Danes after Scyld, and were perhaps of a parallel family – cousins or the like – to Hálfðan and Hrothgar.

Tolkien’s solution to the problem of Hnæf’s place in a Danish chronology depends upon a link between Hnæf and Hálfðan, based around the former being called “hæleð Healf-Dena” (1069a)⁶⁷ mere lines after Hrothgar is referred to as “Healfdenes hildewisan” (1064).⁶⁸ He argues that it is possible that “*Healfdene* was the name of one of Hnæf’s family” and that “among variant possibilities we may select as the most probable

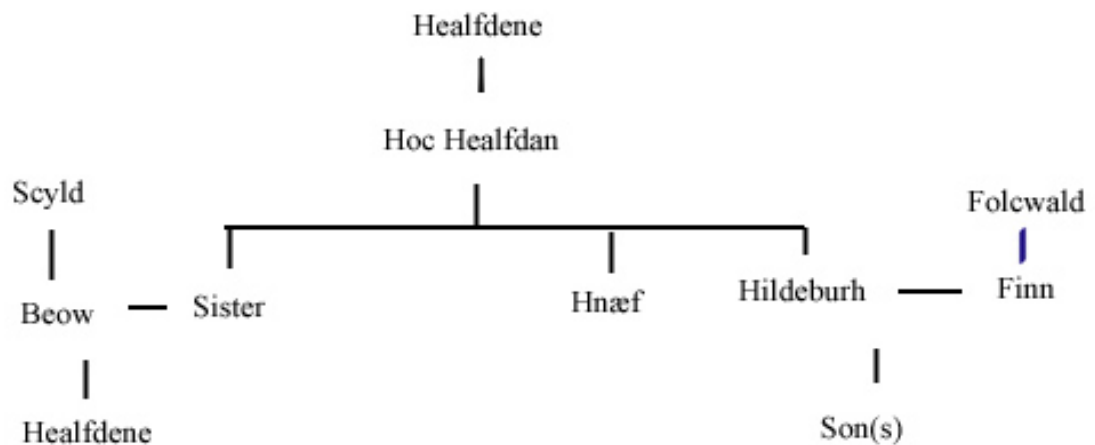
⁶⁶ “Warrior of the Scyldings.”

⁶⁷ “Hero/warrior/lord of the Half-Danes.”

⁶⁸ “Hálfðan’s battle-leader.”

that it was the name of Hoc” (*Finn* 43). By this argument, “Hnæf was... properly Hnæf son of Hoc Healfdene” (*ibid*). In fact, Tolkien goes on to posit that Hálfdan was the sister-son of Hnæf. He arrives at this conclusion by arguing that Hálfdan’s “maternal grandfather... bore Healfdene as a significant name or surname” (44) and that it was transformed into both a proper name for Hálfdan and also a people-name for Hoc and Hnæf.

Figure 2: Tolkien's solution to the Hnæf problem⁶⁹



Tolkien says that,

the carrying on of the mother’s father’s name has many parallels, especially in later Norse, and the carrying on of a ‘nickname’ into a succeeding generation can also be paralleled. In this case Hálfdan Scylding would have stood in the specially intimate relation of ‘sister-son’ to Hnæf Hocing, and so also to Hildeburh and Finn (*Finn* 44).

Such a tie would, as Tolkien points out, be “sufficient to explain the application of *Scyldinga* to Hnæf” (*ibid*), making Hoc and Hnæf Scyldings politically, and Healfdanes

⁶⁹ Family relationships as found in the text of *Finn and Hengest*.

or Hocings genetically. Moreover, Tolkien argues that Heremod has to come before Hnæf because there is still a Jutish people with their own land at the time of his exile; whereas by Finnsburg, the Jutes are landless, which is why Hengest and some Jutes are on one side and other Jutes with Finn on the other (see Chapter 2 under the section “Jutes on Both Sides” for further development).

Conclusion

The intricacies of northern history add complexity and depth to the work, giving it a base of historical realism from which the fantastic can spring. The history explains why Beowulf could approach Hrothgar and offer to kill his monster without giving offence to the king and his men, because Beowulf – through his father – owes him a debt of gratitude. Similarly, the historical aspects increase the stakes of the monster fight because Beowulf is arriving to attempt a feat beyond the ability of the heroes in Scandinavia at the time.

**CHAPTER II:
Finnsburg: Untangling the *Freswæl***

“If any man was capable of dealing with the Irish, it was men of the type of Hnaef’s comitatus - six-foot, fifteen-stone killers who foamed at the mouth and threw fits of homicidal mania on the battlefield. They did their task well” (G.P. Baker 56).⁷⁰

In the Finnsburg Episode, the Danes, under the rule of Hnæf, son of Hoc, arrive at Finnsburg where Hnæf’s sister Hildeburh is married to Finn, the lord of the Frisians.⁷¹ The Frisians and the Danes have been at peace for some time, and Finn and Hildeburh have at least one son of fighting age.⁷² While the Danes are at Finnsburg, a fight breaks out and Hnæf is slain together with Hildeburh’s son, Finn then makes peace with Hnæf’s retainer Hengest and the remaining Danes, and Hildeburh has the bodies her son and brother burned on the same pyre.⁷³ Sadly, the peace only lasts until spring when Hengest and the Danes break the treaty, kill Finn, loot Finnsburg, and carry Hildeburh back home to Denmark.

The *Finnsburg Fragment* is shorter than the 91-line Episode, comprised of only 48 surviving lines, though we do not know exactly how long it was originally. The *Fragment* begins in the midst of the first battle:

... [horn]as byrnað næfre.
Hleoþrode ða heaþogeong cyning:
‘Ne ðis ne dagað eastan, ne her draca ne fleogeð,
ne her ðisse healle hornas ne byrnað,
ac her forþ berað; fugelas singað,

⁷⁰ An entertaining, if rather fanciful description of Hengest and his men once they arrived in England, found in G.P. Baker’s *The Fighting Kings of Wessex*.

⁷¹ “The Finnsburg episode” contains Danish history, peace-weavers and the Jutish question. In order to avoid attempting to juggle multiple topics, I have divided them as follows: matters of Danish history and succession are discussed here, as are the politics involved. Hildeburh and her peace-weaving will be discussed in Chapter 4.

⁷² Or perhaps sons, as *bearnum* is dative plural. This is one of the many cruxes in *Beowulf* due to some confusion over how many sons Hildeburh had (Klaeber 181-2). Some scholars suggest that at least one of these sons was fostered by Hnæf, and the purpose of this visit was to return the son to his homeland – if so what a tragic homecoming it proved to be.

⁷³ There is yet another crux here, as no one is certain whether *eame on eaxle* (line 1117) means “wretchedly on the shoulder”, “arm by shoulder” or even “uncle by the shoulder.”

gylleð græghama, guðwudu hlynneð,
 scyld scefte oncwyd. Nu scyneð þes mona
 waðol under wolcnum; nu arisað weadæda
 ðe ðisne folces nið fremman willað.
 Ac onwacnigeað nu, wigend mine,
 habbað eowre linda, hicgeaþ on ellen,
 winnað on orde, wesað on mode!
 Ða aras mænig goldhladen ðegn, gyrde hine his swurde;
 ða to dura eodon drihtlice ceman,
 Sigeferð and Eaha, hyra sword getugon,
 and æt oþrum durum Ordlaf and Guþlaf
 and Hengest sylf, hwearf him on laste.
 Ða gyt Garulf[e] Guðere styrde,
 ðæt he swa freolic feorh forman siþe
 to ðære healle durum hysta ne bære,
 nu hyt niþa heard anyman wolde;
 ac he frægn ofer eal undearninga,
 deormod hæleþ, hwa ða dura heolde.
 ‘Sigeferþ is min nama,’ cwep he; ‘ic eom Secgenda leod,
 wreccea wide cuð; fæla ic weana gebad,
 heordra hilda; ðe is gyt her witod
 swæper ðu sylf to me secean wylle.’
 Ða wæs on healle wælslihta gehlyn,
 Sceolde celæs bord cenum on handa,
 banhelm berstan – buruhðelu dynede –
 oð æt ðære guðe Garulf gecrang
 ealra ærest eorðbuendra,
 Guðlafes sunu, ymbe hyne godra fæla,
 hwearflatra hræw. Hræfen wandrode
 sweart and sealobrun. Swurdleoma stod,
 swylce eal Finn[e]s Buruh fyrenu wære.
 Ne gefrægn ic næfre wulþlicor æt wera hilde
 sixtig sigebeorna sel gebæran,
 ne nefre swanas whitne medo sel forgyldan,
 ðonne Hnæfe guldan his hægstealdas.
 Hig fuhton fifdagas, swa hyra nan ne feol,
 drihtgesiða, ac hig ða duru heoldon.
 Ða gewat him wund hæleð on wæg gangan,
 sæde þæt his byrne abrocen wære,
 heresceorp unhror, and eac wæs his helm ðyr[e].
 Ða hine sona frægn folces hyrde
 hu ða wigend hyra wunda genæson,
 oððe hwæper ðæra hyssa...”

[... the gables are never burning.” Then the young king spoke: “This is neither dawn from the east nor does a dragon fly hither, nor do the gables of

this hall burn here, but they carried forth; the birds sing, the grey-coated one cries out, the spear shouts, the shield answers the shaft. This moon now advance quickly wandering under the sky; now deeds of woe arise which they wish to perform in hostility against the folk. But awake now, my warriors, hold your shields, think with courage, fight in the front, be in high spirit!

Then many a gold-laden thane arose, girded him with his sword; then the noble warriors, Sigferth and Eaha, went to the door, drew their swords, and near the other doors went Ordlaf and Guthlaf and Hengest himself moved on about in the rear. Then Guthere yet restrained Garulf, that he not bear arms to the hall door in this manner for the first time, now he, hard of battle, wished to seize; but he, the bold warrior, asked without concealment over all, who then held the door. "Sigferth is my name," he said; "I am a man of Secgen, an adventurer known far and wide, I lived through much misery, hard war; there is still appointed which you wish to seek me yourself."

Then in the hall was the sound of loud slaughter, the curved shield was bold in the hand, bone-helms burst – the floor of the stronghold resounded – until Garulf fell in battle first of all the earth-dwellers, son of Guthlaf, about him many brave men, the bodies of the stalwart ones. The raven circled swart and glossy-dark. The sword light shone as if Finn's Burg was all on fire. I have not ever heard that sixty worthier warriors bore themselves better in the battle of men nor did young men ever better repay the white mead, than his young men repaid to Hnæf. They fought for five days, so that none of them fell, but instead they then held the door.

Then the wounded warrior departed, went on (his) way, said that his byrnie was shattered, the battle-sharp (sword) was dulled, and also his helm was pierced through. Then the keeper of the folk soon asked him how the warriors endured their wounds, which of the young men...]

Although we know the final outcome from *Beowulf*, the *Fragment* itself breaks off long before then. Yet for all its brevity, the *Fragment* mentions quite a few other characters not named in the Episode. In addition to the unnamed Finn, Hnæf, Hengest, Oslaf (here Ordlaf) and Guthlaf, two additional Frisians, or perhaps Jutes, are named, Garulf and Guthere, as well as two Scyldings, Eaha and Sigferth. Garulf and Guthere especially figure into the "Jutish question." Garulf is associated with the Jutes because of the appearance in *Widsith* of the name Gefwulf, which occurs directly before a reference to Finn, "ond Ytum Gefwulf, Fin Folcwalding Fresna cynne" (26b-27),⁷⁴ and Tolkien

⁷⁴ "And Gefwulf (ruled) the Jutes, and Fin Folcwalding (ruled) the race of the Frisians."

argues that Garulf from the *Finnsburg Fragment* is either the same person or a relation (*Finn* 33), going so far as to suggest that, “Gefwulf may...have been the last independent King of the Jutes – Garulf his son died in exile” (34 n. 8). Guthere would then likely also become a Jute because of his apparent role as Garulf’s mentor.

Jutes on Both Sides

Based on the names that appear in other sources, Tolkien argued for several historical ties between characters in the Episode, *Fragment*, and other continental sources. Tolkien specifically notes the places in the poem *Widsith*, where Finn Folcwalding, Hnæf Hocingum and Sæferð Sycgum appear in a family tree, from *The Historia Brittonum*, where Finn son of Folcwald replaces the Finn Godwulf found in other records and in several Alemannic ducal families, and finally where the names Huochingus (Hoc), and Nebi/Hnabi appear as father and son respectively of Chlochilaichus (Hygelac) (*Finn* 51). Chambers tells us that, “Finn comes into many Old English pedigrees... the earliest in which we find him, and the only one in which we find his father Folcwald, is that of the Jutish kings of Kent. Here, too, the name of Hengest meets us” (*Beowulf* 262). But most notable among these claims is Tolkien’s firm belief that Hnæf’s retainer Hengest was the same man who, with his brother Horsa, later served under Vortigern led the Saxon invasion of England. Such an argument meant that Hengest “must have necessarily have been a Jute” (168) as Hengest’s Jutish ancestry is something of a consensus. Tolkien’s claim leads us to the “Jutish problem” and from thence to Tolkien’s “private and patent solution” to explain the story with a “Jutes-on-both-sides” theory (5).

“The Jutish problem” as Chambers lays it out, is as follows. In the Episode, the Frisians and the Jutes seem to be allies or perhaps even interchangeable, which makes the treason of the Jutes (i.e. of the Frisians), and therefore of Finn, as well as Hengest’s subsequent acceptance of peace terms, unacceptable. Hengest, his men and the *Beowulf* audience presumably would have recoiled from the thought of making peace directly with the betrayer and murderer of their lord, motivated as they likely were by a system which demanded vengeance carried out by the thanes of a murdered lord, and which would have considered it a degradation for the lord’s thanes to make peace with his murderer. However, if Hengest too was a Jute, his alliance with Hnæf rather than Finn must be explained.

Tolkien suggests that rather than Hengest being of Jutish descent, he might instead be a continental prince from Angle with a Jutish company. If Hengest were an Angle with a mixed Anglian and Jutish following, accompanying his lord Hnæf and Hnæf’s Danish (Scylding) retainers to visit his Frisian brother-in-law who also had Jutes in his service, several points would be made clear. At the same time, we must discover how Anglian prince came to lead a Jutish following. This information can only be explained by the history of the Jutes themselves.

By the time the events of *Beowulf* take place (ca. early 500s, see Chapter 1, Figure 1) if we can believe the account of Saxo Grammaticus, the Jutish kingdom had fallen apart, and some of the Jutes were “subject to some kind of domination by the Angles” (Tolkien, *Finn* 179). This reasoning would account for the Jutes in the company of an Anglian Hengest. The other Jutes would likely have scattered and become mercenaries in foreign kings’ courts; an event that would then explain the presence of Jutes in Finn’s

hall, as well as the presence of Garulf who might have been a Jutish prince in exile (ibid). The Danes had no part in any of this struggle, and thus “Finn had no reason to expect that a visit from his Danish brother-in-law would give rise to any conflict” but “it [would be] otherwise with the Jutes and Angles” because Hengest, he really the great-great-grandson of Wihtlæg of Anglia, would have been directly descended from the murderer of the last king of Jutland, a fact that Finn’s Jutes would not likely forget (180). Tolkien’s theory is certainly a tidy one, but it is unfortunately impossible to prove.

Thus, one could argue, it was the presence of Hengest and his Jutish fighting men rather than Hnæf and his retainers that started the battle with the Jutes of Finn’s company, and this occurrence, removing direct blame from Finn. Such a reading would also explain why the poet tells us that Hildeburh “herian þorfte Eotena treowe” (1071-2a).⁷⁵ The removal of blame from Finn, allowing Hengest and Hnæf’s remaining thanes to accept some form of a treaty, although one that was shaky enough to devolve rapidly to the bloodshed that led to the death of Finn and the return of Hildeburh to Denmark when the thanes of Hnæf could no longer bear the lack of revenge. While this argument certainly exonerates Finn from the charges of treachery to his guests and kin (by marriage), as Klaeber points out, it means that “Hengest is therefore made culpable” in the death of the man with whom he swore some sort of peace treaty (275).

While we cannot conclude anything absolutely about Hengest or the Jutes, or even the *definite* historicity of any of these claims, the arguments are compelling because all the pieces seem to fit so well into established historical events. Moreover, these possible historical connections, if correct, would, link the English audience to these

⁷⁵ “Had no cause to praise the good faith of the Jutes.”

characters through Hengest, the Angles and the Jutes, perhaps allowing them to feel that part of the history of this tale belonged to them as well as to the Scandinavians.

Hengest

While the *definite* historicity of such an argument is difficult to prove, the period of time in which the Venerable Bede claims that Hengest and Horsa arrived in England corresponds surprisingly well with the dates in which the Hengest of *Beowulf* would have concluded matters at Finnsburg and returned Hildeburh to the Danes. In *Beowulf*, Hengest is the seemingly undisputed leader of Danish remnant left after the first battle and Hnæf's death. He and the surviving Danes fight so fiercely that they are in a position to make favorable terms of peace, swearing "elne unflitme ađum"(1097)⁷⁶ with Finn, and it is he that Guthlaf and Oslaf must convince to break the treaty.

While there is only one analogue for the Finnsburg Episode in its entirety, both Hengest and Finn appear in other sources. While in *Beowulf* Hnæf is the more important character, it is Finn and Hengest who play the most important roles, and who appear in the most outside sources. The Venerable Bede, writing in Northumbria in the eighth century, said that the first leaders of the incoming Germanic peoples were "said to be brothers Hengist and Horsa" and that they were descendants of Woden (63). The historian Nennius, writing in the ninth century, says that Hengest and Horsa were "brothers, and sons of Wihtgils...son of Witta; Witta of Wecta; Wecta of Woden; Woden of Frithowald; Frithowald of Frithuwulf; Frithuwulf of *Finn*; Finn of Godwulf; Godwulf

⁷⁶ "Oaths of undisputed valor."

of Geat, who as they say, was the son of a god” (Giles 396).⁷⁷ He tells a long story in which the British king Vortigern made an alliance with them when they first landed, and then he fell in love with and married Hengest’s daughter. Being unwise and immoral, by degrees, Vortigern allowed his power to slip through his fingers and into the cunning hands of Hengest until the later was able to overthrow the former and to establish himself permanently in Britain (396-408).

Æthelweard’s Chronicle tells of “two young men, Hengist and Horsa” (Giles 4). The story it tells is much the same as in Nennius, though this chronicle gives their lineage as “Hengist and Horsa, sons of Wyhrtels: their grandfather was Wecta, and their great-grandfather Withar, whose father was Woden, who also was king of a multitude of barbarians” (5), thus removing the line above Woden and the issue of Hengest not being of the right generation to encounter Finn. Additionally, *Æthelweard’s Chronicle*, like Bede’s work, gives the landing date of Hengest and Horsa as 449. Hengest disappears from the chronicle after 473, and in 488, Hengest’s son Æsc is said to reign in Kent, presumably after the death of his father (7).

Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing much later in the twelfth century, took much of his material from Nennius, though he greatly expanded the role of Hengest’s daughter to the point where she was responsible for Vortigern’s son’s death (in Nennius, his son was killed in battle against Hengest), and had a greater hand in the downfall of the Britons (155-64). Hengest, however, was later defeated by Aurelius Ambrosius, and executed (188-93).

⁷⁷ That the only other source in which Finn appears outside of *Widsith* should place him as an ancestor of Hengest is certainly strange.

All of these sources agree on the basics: Hengest and Horsa arrived from northern Europe with their men (which in Bede's case at least, include Jutes). Vortigern enlists their help against his enemies (Picts, Scots, other Saxons). Hengest grows very influential and gains land either through Vortigern's gifts or through Vortigern's marriage to his daughter. Through cunning (and sometimes treachery), Hengest overthrows Vortigern and becomes an independent ruler. Such actions (including his willingness to break oaths to Vortigern or Finn) would seem to be consistent with the man we find in *Beowulf*, who seems to be a cunning man, willing to break oaths and alliances if they no longer suit his purposes.

Conclusion

The historical aspects of the Finnsburg Episode and *Fragment* both serve to anchor *Beowulf* in northern history – a history that is now expanded to include more than just the Danes with the inclusion of the Frisians and Jutes, and possibly even the English. Moreover, it could be that after a fight with a fantastical beast, Grendel, the poet felt it necessary to remind his audience that his work was not entirely outlandish and impossible, but that it took place among the peoples of the north. The poet's story occurred not only among people who were both historical figures themselves, but who also remembered the historical figures that had come before them.

Chapter III: The Weder Forecast: Cloudy with a Chance of Swedes

Eft þæt geiode ufaran dogrum
hildehlæmmum, syððan Hygelac læg,
ond Hear[dr]ede hildemeceas
under bordhreoðan to bonan wurdon,
ða hyne gesohtan on sigeþeode
hearde hildefrecan, Heaðo-Scilfingas,
niða genægðan nefan Hererices:
syððan Beowulfe br(a)de rice
 on hand gehwearf
(*Beowulf* 2200-2208a).⁷⁸

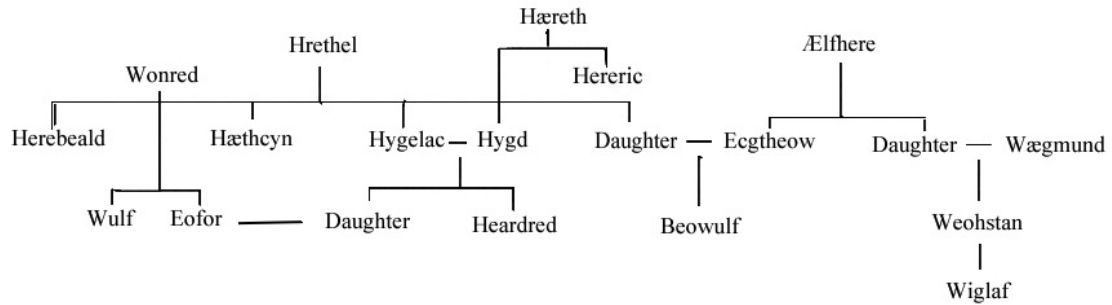
Had the *Beowulf* poet begun the poem where we might expect a work about a Geatish hero to begin, he might have begun his tale among the Geats. We might have heard of the glory of the deeds of Hrethel and his ancestors. Instead we hear about the Geatish kings piecemeal, frequently through Beowulf, as he recounts whatever story he feels is relevant to a given situation. Hrothgar, too, contributes to our knowledge of the Geats when he recalls how Beowulf's father Ecgtheow sought refuge with him when he killed a man. Because we are not told of any people or events which came before the end of Hrethel's life, everything recounted about the Geats has an impact on Beowulf's life, and everything that Beowulf does has an effect on the Geats.

Hrethel, Herebald, Hæthcyn, and Hygelac

Hrethel, like Hálfdan, has three sons, Herebald, Hæthcyn, Hygelac, and an unnamed daughter who is Beowulf's mother. However, unlike our multi-sourced information about Hálfdan and his sons, all that we know of Hrethel, Herebald, and Hæthcyn comes from *Beowulf*.

⁷⁸ "In later days it afterwards happened that in the crashes of battle when Hygelac lay dead, and the battle sword under the broad shield became death for Heardred, then the brave warriors of battle, the Heatho-Scilfings, went among the glorious people, attacked Hereric's nephew: thereupon the wide realm passed into Beowulf's hands."

Figure 3: The Geats and the Wægmundings⁷⁹



When Beowulf arrives in Heorot, Hrothgar says, “Ic hine cuðe cnihtwesende; wæs his ealdfæder Ecgþeo haten,”⁸⁰ and that Ecgtheow is “ðæm to ham forgeaf Hreþel Geata agan dohtor” (374-5).⁸¹ Hrothgar knows these things because Ecgtheow came to him seeking aid after “wearþ he Heapolafe to hand bonan mid Wilfingum” (460-1a),⁸² and he “sende...Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg ealde madmas” (471-2a).⁸³ Hrothgar also says of Beowulf that he “hine cuðe cnihtwesende” (372)⁸⁴ which seems to indicate that when Ecgtheow came to Denmark, he brought a young Beowulf with him.

Towards the end of the poem and of his life, and remembering the wars with the Swedes and the events of his own childhood, in which Hrethel played a large part, Beowulf says:

Ic wæs syfanwintre þa mec sin(c)a baldor,
 freawine folca æt minum fæder genam;
 heold mec ond hæfde Hreðel cyining,
 geaf me sinc ond symbol, sibbe gemunde;
 næs ic him to life laðra owihte,
 beorn in burgum, þonne his bearna hwylc,
 Herebeald ond Hæðcyn oððe Hygelac min
 (lines 2428-34).

⁷⁹ Family relationships as found in the text of *Beowulf*.

⁸⁰ “I knew him (Beowulf) being a boy; old father was called Ecgtheow.”

⁸¹ “To that man Hrethel of the Geats gave his only daughter to home.”

⁸² “He became a hand-bane for Heatholaf among the Wylfings.”

⁸³ “Sent...old treasures to the Wylfings over the water’s back.”

⁸⁴ “Knew him being a boy.”

[I was seven winters old when my lord of treasures, friend of the folk, took me from my father; King Hrethel guarded me and held me, gave me treasures and feasts, he remembered friendship; for him I was not more hateful in anything in life, the warrior in the stronghold, than each one of his sons, Herebeald and Hæthcyn or my Hygelac.]

So Hrethel raised his grandson like a son from the time he was seven until the time he died. Fulk, Bjork and Niles point out that, “in monastic culture, a child could be removed from the care of his parents at the age of seven, when the education of oblates normally began” and they note that “secular customs were perhaps similar” (Klaeber *n.* 2428ff, 245). However, in *Beowulf*, the word *geniman* (in the passage above *genam*, meaning “take, seize, or take away”) is used six times, and all but twice either refers to taking treasure from a hoard (2776 and 3165) or is used to describe the way in which Grendel (122) and his mother (1302) take men from Heorot. In each case, there is an element of violence towards and a lack of consent from the thing being snatched. These two elements are especially obvious when Grendel and his mother seize men, as they drag them from their beds to be killed. With the hoards too, the ones doing the taking are acting without the permission of the owners of the treasure, and in Wiglaf’s case, have just fought the owner. The parallel is less apparent with Hrothgar taking leave of Beowulf, though given the violence of Hrothgar’s emotion, perhaps the parallel is not so far off. Beowulf might not have minded being embraced and wept on, certainly, as much as the Danes minded being eaten, but he still might well have been taken by surprise. Given the nature of the other uses of *geniman*, I am inclined to entertain the possibility that, in the case of Hrethel taking Beowulf from his father, it may be that Hrethel removed Beowulf from his father’s care, to be fostered, perhaps in less than amiable circumstances.

If this scenario is indeed what occurred, it is necessary to explain *why*. I believe that the answer lies in the actions of Ecgtheow. Apparently Ecgtheow was a valued member of Hrethel's circle, evidenced by his marriage to Hrethel's daughter, despite his being an outsider.⁸⁵ However, if true, one would expect that he would turn to Hrethel for help rather than sail all the way to Denmark to obtain Hrothgar's after he killed Heatholaf the Wylfing. Perhaps Ecgtheow somehow angered Hrethel when he killed Heatholaf and thus he was unable to obtain Hrethel's help to pay the *weregild* to the Wylfings. This chain of events could necessitate his journey to Heorot.

Moreover, in order for Hrothgar to say that he "hine cuðe cnihtwesende" (374),⁸⁶ Ecgtheow must have brought young Beowulf with him. If that was indeed the case, perhaps Ecgtheow was able to return to Geatland once the *weregild* was paid, and perhaps that is when Hrethel took Beowulf from his father. It is also possible that there was no falling out between Hrethel and Ecgtheow, but that Ecgtheow went to Hrothgar because, as the husband of probably Wealhtheow the Wulfing/Wylfing, he stood the best chance of resolving the issues between Ecgtheow and the Wylfings.⁸⁷ Such a possibility, while perfectly satisfactory for explaining the journey to Denmark, does not explain the use of *geniman*. Of course, it is also possible that *geniman* simply means "take" and that Ecgtheow was perfectly willing to let Hrethel take Beowulf and foster him.

Of all the things we learn about Hrethel, the most memorable – and the lengthiest – is the story of the death of Herebald in a hunting accident at the hands of his younger

⁸⁵ At the end of the poem, Beowulf calls his thane Wiglaf his kinsman. Earlier in the poem, however, we learn that Wiglaf's father Weohstan fought for Onela the Swede against Eanmund, Eadgils, Beowulf and Heardred, and it was Weohstan who killed Eanmund. Additionally, we know that Beowulf's mother is the daughter of Hrethel, leaving Beowulf's father Ecgtheow to be the connection to the Wægmondings.

⁸⁶ "Knew him (Beowulf) being a boy."

⁸⁷ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of Wealhtheow's family. Also see Sam Newton's *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* pp. 121-2.

brother Hæthcyn. The poignant force of the story is twofold, stemming from the grief of a father at the loss of an eldest son, and the inability to exact revenge on the slayer because he is also a son – a heart wrenching double bind. As Beowulf says, “þæt wæs feohleas gefeoht, fyrenum gesyngad... sceolde hwæðre swa þeah æðeling unwrecen ealdres linnan” (2441-4).⁸⁸ After recounting this story, Beowulf segues into the digression commonly known as the “Father’s Lament” given below, saying that like the old man in the digression, these events:

...bið geomorlic gomelum ceorle
to gebidanne, þæthis byre ride
giong on galgan. Þonne he gyd wrece,
sarigne sang, þonne his sunu hangað
hrefne to hroðre, ond he him helpe ne mæg
eald and infrod ænige gefremman,
symble bið gemyndgad morna gehwylce
eaforan ellorsið; oðres ne gymeð
to gebidanne burgum in innan
yrfewardas, þonne se an hafað
þurh deaðes nyd dæda gefondad.
Gesyhð sorhcearig on his suna bure
Winsele westne, windge reste,
Reotge berofene; ridend swefað,
Hæleð in hoðman; nis þær hearpan sweg,
Gomen in geardum, swylce ðær iu wæron.

Gewiteð þonne on sealman, sorhleod gæleð
An æfter anum; þuhte him eall to rum,
Wongas ond westede (lines 2444-62a).

[...will be sad to experience for the old man, that his young son swings on the gallows. Then he recites a formal speech, a sad song, when his son hangs to benefit the raven, and he, old and very wise, may not perform help for him, the death of the child is called to mind every one of the mornings; ... Sorrowful, he sees his son’s chamber in the deserted wine-hall, the windy bed, bereft of joy; the horsemen sleep in death, the heroes in the grave; the music of the harp is not there, the joy in the dwellings, there formally was.

⁸⁸ “That was a fight without wergild, a sin violently committed, ... however, the prince should be parted from his life unavenged.”

He departs then from the bedside, sings songs of sorrow one after one; all seems too large for him, the fields and homestead.]

As I said in the introduction, however, I do not believe that “The Father’s Lament” is so much a digression as a window into Hrethel’s thoughts. Indeed, Beowulf’s comment: “Swa wedra helm æfter Herebealde heortan sorge weallinde wæg; wihte ne meahte on ðam feorhbonan fæghðe gebetan” (2462b-65)⁸⁹ seems to indicate that Hrethel’s feelings and actions were very close to those expressed in “The Father’s Lament.” It would seem that Hrethel dies, not long after Herebeald, as Beowulf says, “He ða mid þære sorhge, þe him sio sar belamp, gumdream ofgeaf” (2468-9a):⁹⁰ a melancholy fate indeed. Though the poet’s insistence that Hrethel “Godes leoht geceas” (2469b)⁹¹ supplies a slightly less gloomy element to the end of his life.

After Hrethel’s death, war with the Swedes breaks out, and Ongentheow, king of the Swedes kills Hæthcyn, now lord of the Geats, near Raven’s Wood, which the poet calls both *Hrefna Wudu* and *Hrefnes Holt* (lines 2482b-3 also 2924-5). In the morning, Hygelac, now lord of the Geats, sweeps in and rescues Hæthcyn’s men, who have been trapped and leaderless all night. Eofor, one of Hygelac’s thanes, kills Ongentheow and the day is saved. As a reward for slaying Ongentheow and avenging the death of Hæthcyn, Hygelac gives Eofor his daughter in marriage.⁹² Presumably, a short while thereafter, Hygelac marries Hygd and they have a son, Heardred. Shortly after *that*, Beowulf must have traveled to and returned from Denmark. Upon Beowulf’s return, both

⁸⁹“Thus the helm of the Weders carried afterwards the welling sorrow of the heart for Herebeald; he might not settle the feud on the life of the slayer.”

⁹⁰“There he then with that sorrow, which bitter thing befell him, gave up the joys of men.”

⁹¹ “Chose God’s light.”

⁹² This daughter is presumably, from an earlier marriage, which would explain why Hygd is described as being so young when Hygelac himself is from the same generation as Beowulf’s father. It would also explain how Hygelac had a marriageable daughter before Beowulf departed for Denmark when Hygd had only been a few short years at court.

Hygelac's generosity and his affection for his nephew are displayed to astonishing effect. Hygelac rewards Beowulf with an heirloom sword, "golde gegyrede" (2192a)⁹³ and even more impressively, "seofan þusendo, bold ond bregostol" (2195b-6a)⁹⁴ a significant amount of land which the note in Klaeber says was "equivalent to that of North Mercia (2300 sq. km.)" (n. 2195^b 237). The poet then goes on to say that Hygelac had divided his kingdom nearly in half, keeping the larger half only because he was older.⁹⁵ However, the event for which Hygelac is most famous is also the one, which results in his death.

Hygelac's raid and death are of particular significance not only within the poem but also because the raid is generally the event which links the Hygelac of *Beowulf* to his analogues. In *Beowulf*, the account of his death is spread out in two different places, first in lines 1202-1214b where the poet proleptically tells us that Hygelac will be killed on a raid in Frisia wearing the fabulous necklace, which Wealhtheow has just given to Beowulf. Essentially, the poet says that Hygelac's pride led him to a fall ("syþðan he for wlenco wean ahsode, fæhðe to Frysum"⁹⁶).

The second account lacks the moral judgement of the first, focused as it is on Beowulf's actions during the raid, saying:

No þæt læsest wæs
 hondgemot(a) þær mon Hygelac sloh,
 syððan Geata cyning guðe ræsum,
 freawine folca Freslondum on,
 Hreðles eafora hiorodryncum swealt,
 Bille gebeaten (2354b-59a).

⁹³ "Gold adorned."

⁹⁴ "Seven thousand hides of land, hall and princely-seat."

⁹⁵ Relatively speaking, at any rate, as Beowulf calls him young when speaking to Hrothgar (1831b). It is possible that Hygelac and Beowulf were closer in age than might be expected from two people of different generations, if Beowulf's mother were the eldest and Hygelac the youngest of Hrethel's children.

⁹⁶ "When he, because of pride, sought for misery, the feud in Frisia."

[That was not the least of battles, when men slew Hygelac, when the King of the Geats, the friend of the folk, Hrethel's son, died in blood, struck by a sword blade in the storms of battle in Frisia.]

Although there may be slight differences in tone and detail, the two versions tell the same story: Hygelac goes on a raid to Frisia and dies there.

It is at this juncture that we hear about the Franks, as Hygelac dies in Frisia fighting against the Hetware, Hugas, Franks and Frisians (2910a-20b). Later Wiglaf says that the “Merewioingas milts” (2921)⁹⁷ was withheld from the Geats. The mention of the Merovingians, the ruling dynasty of the Franks of the time, disguised by the most dreadful of the scribal errors, is perhaps the single-most important historical reference in the entire poem, as it links *Beowulf* to an actual event without a doubt.

Half of Hygelac's analogues (both of the Frankish ones and the Anglo-Saxon one), interestingly enough) make mention of this raid, whereas the Scandinavian analogues, while preserving a tradition of death in battle, are different from the other and from *Beowulf*. The *Historia Francorum* written between the years 573 and 594 (Gregory of Tours 24) by the Frankish historian Gregory of Tours, is the earliest among these analogues and the one which is closest to *Beowulf* (except for one detail). In 525, Chlochilaichus (Hygelac) leads the Danes on a “ship-borne raid” (Garmonsway 113) into Frankish lands. He attacks part of the lands of the Frankish King Theodoric and is killed by Theuderic's son Theudebert who has been sent to fight him. The *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*, an Anglo-Latin text from the ninth or tenth century (Orchard, *Pride* 86), speaks of “King Huiglaucus of the Getae and his amazing hugeness,” and of his bones preserved on an island in the Rhine (Garmonsway 113). The *Liber Monstrorum* also recounts that Huiglaucus was slain by the Franks, and is the only source to call

⁹⁷ “The might of the Merovingian.”

Hygelac a Geat. The *Gesta Francorum* (c. 727) appears to be based on Gregory of Tours, for it is very close in details. In it, the Danes and their king Chlochilaicus attack the Franks in “sea-borne host” (Garmonsway 113) The lands they attack are Theuderic’s and he again sends his son Theudobert to protect the land. Here too Theudobert kills Chlochilaicus.

Saxo Gramaticus has two different tales about Hygelac, the first in Book IV where he mentions in passing that Hugletus (Hygelac), King of Denmark, was defeated at sea by Hömothus and Högrimus of Sweden. The second mention comes from Book VI where King Hugletus is a very greedy and very wealthy king of *Ireland* (of all places). He is attacked by Starkatherus and Haco of Denmark and has only two good soldiers, Gegathus and Suipdagerus who fight the Danes nearly without help (Garmonsway 114). In vain, as it turns out, for Hugletus is killed, and the Irish are defeated. *Heimskringla* tells of Huggleikr, son of Álfer, king of Sweden. Huggleikr is in *Heimskringla* as in Saxo: greedy, and not at all a fighter. He also apparently has wizards in his employ (115). He and his champions Svipdagr and Geigaðr are attacked and defeated by the Danes Haki and Hagbarðr. Haki kills Huggleikr and becomes king of the Swedes.

From these various sources, it is impossible to determine why the Scandinavian sources have Hygelac as a Dane, a Swede, and then as an Irishman, but given the date and nature of the earlier works, specifically of Gregory of Tours’ (he was, after all, born within the lifetimes of those who may well have remembered Hygelac’s raid) I am inclined to believe that Hygelac was indeed a Scandinavian ruler who invaded Frisia and was there defeated. As time went on, however, he became disassociated from his people

and geographical location, until only the memory of a king defeated and killed in battle existed in connection to the name Hygelac.

The Beowulf Analogues

There are seven supposed analogues for the figure of Beowulf: (the characters Bǫðvar Bjarki/Bierghi/Bodvarus Biarki/Biarci found in *Bjarkamal*, *Skjoldunga saga*, Saxo, *Skáldskaparmál*, *Series Runica*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and *Bjarkarímur*) all of whom are fairly consistent with each other. However, I am skeptical about the actual connection between the figure of Bjarki and that of Beowulf. True, the bear figures prominently in both names: Bjarki means “little bear” in Old Norse; Beowulf possibly means “bee wolf” i.e. the bear in Anglo-Saxon. Both heroes arrive at Heorot or Leire after a journey from their home, and have a part in removing a monstrous creature from the environs. However, Bjarki remains as one of Hrólfr Kraki’s companions, marrying his daughter and sharing in his downfall, whereas Beowulf gives his help to Hrothgar but then returns to his lord in another country entirely and eventually inherits his kingdom. Certainly *Beowulf* could be drawn from the same “bear-son tale” *ur*-story as the Scandinavian tales, but there is too much variation of important information between the two to merit as close a comparison as in the cases of many of the Danish characters who are often such close matches with their analogues.

Additionally, as much as I should like to discuss in detail all the complexities of Beowulf’s family and Wiglaf’s, and while an understanding of their relationship to the Geats and Swedes contributes to the understanding of the internal complexities of the poem, they unfortunately contribute little to the historical (or mythological) discussion of

Beowulf. So will move directly to the Swedes in an attempt to retain some semblance of focus on the historical aspects of the poem.

The Swedish Wars: Ongentheow, Onela, Ohthere, Eanmund and Eadgils

The story of the Swedes intersects with both the Danes and the Geats in a myriad of confusing ways (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: The Geats and Swedes⁹⁸

The Danes	The Jutes	The Franks	The Geats	The Swedes
Scyld arrives as a founding				
and grows up	455 Hengest defeats Vortigern	456 Merovech dies		
Scyld Scaefing King of the Danes	457 Hengest and Æsc take Kent			
Scyld defeats the Heruli				
<i>Probably twenty to thirty years pass</i>	565 Hengest wins victory at Wipped's Feet			
			Swerting	
Scyld dies and Beow succeeds him (c. 475)		481 Childeric dies		
	488 Æsc King of Kent (likely that Hengest is dead)	Clovis defeats Roman Syagrius in 486		
Halfdan succeeds Beow	The Heathobards	496 Clovis is converted to Christianity by his wife		
Heorogar, Hrothgar, Halga Yrsa (?)	Froði		Hrethel	Ongentheow
Yrsa marries Onela			Herebald, Hæthcyn, sister, Hygelac	Onela, Ohthere
Hrothgar marries Wealhtheow			Sister marries Ecgtheow	Onela marries Yrsa
Heorowearð, Hrothulf, Freawaru	Ingeld		Beowulf born	
Heorogar killed, Halfdan dies at some point (ca. 490)				Weohstan
Hrothgar pays wergild to Wulfings for Ecgtheow			Ecgtheow kills Heatholaf the Wulfing and goes to <i>Seven years pass since Beowulf's birth.</i>	
Feud with the Heathobards	Feud with the Danes		Hrethel 'adopts' Beowulf	

⁹⁸ Information on the Danes, Swedes, Geats, Heathobards and Frisians summarized from *Beowulf*, dates and movements of Hengest after Finnsburg from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, dates and kings of the Merovingians from Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*.

The Danes	The Heathobards	The Franks	The Geats	The Swedes
Freawaru			Herebald killed by Hæthcyn	
Builds Heorot			Hrethel dies	
Grendel comes			Hæthcyn killed by Ongentheow. Hygelac becomes king. More wars with Swedes. Eofor kills Ongentheow. Hygelac gives him his daughter in marriage	
<i>Twelve years pass</i>				
Hrethric and Hrothmund			Hygelac marries Hygd	
			Heardred born	
Freawaru to marry Ingeld to end feud		511 Clovis dies, succeeded by Childebert I (d. 558), Chlodomer (d. 524), Lothar I (d. 561) and Theoderic (d. 533)	Beowulf swims with Brecca	
Beowulf the Geat arrives (c. 512?)			Beowulf to Denmark	
Beowulf kills Grendel and Grendel's mother			Beowulf returns	
Freawaru marries Ingeld. At wedding feast, one of Ingeld's men kills one of the Danes.				
Ingeld falls out of love with Freawaru				
Heorot attacked by Ingeld, Hrothgar and Hrothulf defend it, but and though it is burned down, the Danes win, and Ingeld is killed.		524 Chlodomer dies		
		Hygelac's Raid against Franks and Frisians, Hugas and Hetware Hygelac killed, Beowulf kills Dayraven the Frank. Theudebert son of Theoderic I leads Franks/Frisians (525 AD)		
Hrethric			Beowulf refuses the throne, Heardred becomes king	
Hrothulf/Hrolf Kraki				Eanmund and Eadgils rebel against Onela

The Franks	The Geats	The Swedes
	Heardred helps Eanmund and Eadgils and is killed in battle. Weohstan kills Eanmund. Onela gives Weohstan Eanmund's armor.	
	Beowulf becomes king (c. 530)	
533 Theoderic I dies, Theudebert I (533-48)	Beowulf kills Onela	
	Beowulf rules	
548 Theudebald (548-555)		
555 Theudebald dies		
558 Clothar I (558-561)		
561 Lothar I dies. Charbert I (561-67) (daughter marries Æthelbert of Kent), Guntram (561-92), Sigeburt (561-75)		Wiglaf grows up
	Wiglaf joins Beowulf in Geatland	
	For fifty years	
575 Childebert II (575-95)		
The might of the Merovingian	Thief steals cup, dragon wakes. Hall destroyed	
	Beowulf and Wiglaf kill the dragon, Beowulf dies.	
	Wiglaf foretells doom for the Geats (ca. AD 580)	

In *Beowulf*, Ongentheow is, presumably, a contemporary of Hrethel the Geat and Hálfðan the Dane, and the father of Onela and Ohthere. He kills Hygelac's brother Hæthcyn and rules the Swedes for nearly the entire poem, until his death at the hands of Hygelac's thane Eofor in the same battle in which Hæthcyn died. Onela and Ohthere, Ongentheow's sons, also fight wars with the Geats. Ohthere is not a particularly active character in *Beowulf*, but his sons, Eanmund and Eadgils cause a good deal of trouble for both Swedes and Geats. Onela becomes king of Sweden after Ongentheow's death, and it is he who marries Hrothgar's sister, possibly creating an alliance between the Danes and Swedes. Eanmund and Eadgils, Ohthere's sons, rebel against Onela and take refuge with Hygelac's son Heardred. It is their presence that calls down the wrath of Onela upon the Geats, and because of them, Heardred is killed in battle. Eanmund is also killed, and his armour is given by Onela to Wiglaf's father. Eadgils, on the other hand, survives and becomes king when Beowulf kills Onela to avenge Heardred's death.

There are only four analogues for Ongentheow, *Widsith*, *Íslindingabók*, *Langföगत* and *Heimskringla*. *Widsith* merely says that, "Sweom Ongendþeow" (31),⁹⁹ while *Íslindingabók* and *Langföगत* have genealogies of Swedish kings in which Ongentheow appears as Egill. *Íslindingabók* notes, "Aun the Old; Egill Vendilkráka; Óttarr; Aðisl at Uppsala" and *Heimskringla* has the same list, though it leaves out Anun's epithet "the Old," gives Egill the name "Tunni's-Foe, and appropriates Vendilkráka from Egill and gives it to Óttarr, and spells Aðisl's name as the more common Aðils. *Heimskringla*, however, briefly tells the story of Egill son of Anun, a king of Sweden who was not much of a warrior, and was at some point in his reign, defeated. Egill flees to Zealand and takes refuge with King Froði of Denmark. Egill's stay in Denmark is

⁹⁹ "Ongentheow (ruled) the Swedes."

conditional upon his promise to pay tribute to Froði when he returns to Sweden, which he does not do, but he does give mighty gifts to Froði every year in lieu of tribute, and Froði and Egill remain good friends until Egill's death by a great boar. It is perhaps stretching the interpretation a bit far, but Garmonsway points out that in *Beowulf*, Ongentheow is killed by Eofor whose name means "boar" and so perhaps the two stories are more related than they might seem (Garmonsway 214).

Onela (Áli, Alonis or Alo in the outside sources) has five analogues, all of them very brief mentions, and all of them Scandinavian. In *Hyndluljóð*, he is called "the most famous of men" (Garmonsway 216), *Káfsvísa* from *Skáldskaparmál* tells us that he did not get along with Aðgils, the analogue for Eadgils with whom he has a fight on horseback, with his special horse Hrafn. *Skáldskaparmál* also tells of enmity between Áli and Aðgils who is married, if a wife is mentioned, to Hrólfr's mother Yrsa. There is also an ice battle on the frozen Lake Vænir in which Áli is defeated by Aðgils and Hrólfr Kraki's champions and killed. *Heimskringla* only mentions Áli in passing, calling him Aðgils' foeman. *Bjarkarímur* also tells of the ice-battle between Ali and Aðgils (here Aðals) where again Aðgils wins with help from Hrólfr. In this version, Ali's special horse Hrafn is also mentioned.

Ohthere (here Óttarr) appears only in *Heimskringla*, where he is the son of Egill (Ongentheow), and is most decidedly *not* on good terms with his father's friend Froði. Óttarr refuses to continue his father's gifts or to pay tribute, and thus calls down the wrath of the Danes on Sweden. In an attempt at revenge, Óttarr leads a raid against Denmark when he knows Froði is abroad, but he fails spectacularly and is killed. Eanmund

(Eymundr or Hömothus), also has only one analogue in *Hyndluljóð*, where he is allied with Hálfðan of Denmark and called “the Noble” (Garmonsway 216).

Eadgils (Aðils or Adilsus), on the other hand, appears frequently – especially in enmity with Áli. *Bjarkamal* only mentions “the keenest companions of Aðils” (156), and *Kalfsvisa* only that Ali on his horse Hrafn and Aðils on his horse Sløngvr, have a fight. The *Chronicon Lethrense* however, tells how Athislus (Eadgils) married Ursula, mother of Hrólfr, and of their daughter Sculd. Athislus gives Sculd part of Zealand called Hornshereth. He also appears to have some level of power over the Danes, as Garmonsway says that he “allegedly imposed...two non-Skjölding kings on Denmark” (157). *Skjöldunga saga* tells how Adilsus of Sweden fights Alo king of the Upplands in Norway at the frozen Lake Wæner. Rolf’s men help, but Adilsus denies them the reward he promised and attempts to have Rolfo killed. Incidentally, the ring Sviagriss comes from him. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Athislus, son of Hothbroddus marries Ursa to exempt himself from paying tribute. He is greedy and not so pleasant. He is humiliated when Rolfo leaves and Rolfo eventually “overthrows him in war” (Garmonsway 166).

Heimskringla tells of Aðils son of Ottarr who goes to Saxland and plunders it. Saxland happens to be ruled by Alof the mighty, whose daughter is Yrsa, wife/daughter of Helgi. Aðils marries Yrsa, temporarily looses her back to Helgi, and then gets her back when Yrsa leaves Helgi upon learning that he is her father. He fights a war with Ali and kills him, but is later killed falling from his horse. In both *Hrólfs saga kraka* and in *Bjarkarímur*, Aðils is responsible for the feud with Hrólfr because he neglects to give Hrólfr’s champions their promised reward for their help in the victory at Lake Vænir over Ali. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, we are told that Aðils is both a miser and a wizard.

As in *Beowulf*, Onela (Áli) and Eadgils (Aðils) do not get along. In the Scandinavian sources, however, Aðils goes to his step-son Hrólfr for help, whereas in *Beowulf*, Eadgils goes to Geatish Beowulf. Likewise Aðils, not Onela, marries Hálfðan's daughter. It is impossible to actually determine why it is that all of the sources show the Swedes fighting each other and the Danes with no mention of the Geats, but I cannot help but wonder if the *Beowulf* poet, needing a real-life people for his hero to rule and fight for, settled on the Geats because of their impending disappearance from history and then appropriated a number of Hrothulf's stories for Beowulf.

After all these wars with Sweden, and Beowulf's death, his kinsman Wiglaf balefully foretells the destruction of the Geats because all of their former enemies will no longer be afraid of them now that Beowulf is dead, and an unnamed Geatish women at Beowulf's pyre sings of "wælfylla wo(r)n... hy[n]ðo ond hæf(t)nyd" (3153b-5a).¹⁰⁰ Beowulf is dead, and now comes the night.

Conclusion

As in the case with the Danes, the Geatish history especially, helps anchor *Beowulf* into a real historical framework, because of the date of Hygelac's death given in Gregory of Tours. Moreover, understanding the political situation of the Merovingians and Swedes gives us a better view of the political situation in Scandinavia and northern Europe, while allowing Beowulf to continue interacting with real kings and heroes. Additionally, the majority of Beowulf's life is lived among the Geats, so a discussion of the Geats is vital to an understanding of the events in Beowulf's life.

¹⁰⁰ "A great quantity of slaughter... humiliation and captivity."

Chapter IV: The Peace-weaver: Caught in the Web of Fate

“A Queen should weave peace”
(Heaney 133).

In Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon corpora, cycles of revenge devastate entire families and people-groups. We only have to look to the aforementioned analogues of the Danes and Swedes to find examples of the destructive force of the blood feud. In *Beowulf* alone we see the Swedes and the Geats attack each other, first to avenge Hæthcyn’s death, then Ongentheow’s, then Heardred’s, and Ongentheow’s killer, Eofor, kills him to avenge his own brother. Likewise, Grendel’s mother comes to Heorot to avenge her son’s death, and Hengest and his men break a peace-treaty to revenge the death of Hnæf. Beowulf himself predicts that desire for revenge will cause the failure of the peace between the Heathobards and the Danes, and tells Hrothgar, “selre bið æghwæm þæt he his freond wrece þonne he fela murne” (1384-1385).¹⁰¹ As one can imagine with a mindset so focused on revenge, feuds became both costly and nearly impossible to stop. Enter the royal brides, the peace-weavers, sent either to solidify an alliance, or perhaps as the last ditch effort to make right what had been so miserably ruined by conflict.

Often the peace-weavers were powerless to prevent the fighting, which led to devastating losses for the women who were so often wife, mother and sister or daughter of those men fighting against each other. The very need for a peace-weaver in the enemy camp often predetermined her failure. The northern Germanic, heroic culture in which warriors and peace-weavers alike were ensnared, with its stubborn insistence on

¹⁰¹ “It is best for everyone that he avenge his friend (rather than) that he mourn much.”

vengeance, left the peace-weavers attempting to mend tears in alliances that were destroyed beyond repair.

In *Beowulf*, there are nine women – Wealhtheow, Freawaru, Hygd, Hildeburh, Modthryth, the unnamed daughter of Hygelac, the unnamed wife of Onela, and the unnamed Geatish woman – ten if you count Grendel’s mother. Of these nine, neither Beowulf’s mother, Hygelac’s daughter, nor the unnamed Geatish woman at Beowulf’s funeral are shown to be queens or peace-weavers. Of the remaining women, the peace-weavers, those women, married off to foreign kings to create alliances or end blood feuds (or in Hygelac’s daughter’s case, as a reward), only Wealhtheow, and possibly Hildeburh appear to perform any peace-weaving and two, Wealhtheow and Hygd, appear outside a “digression.” As Andy Orchard says, “the poet... has thereby effected a contrast between... Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, and Grendel’s mother... and ...Hygd, Freawaru, Thryth” (*Companion* 84).

The term “peace-weaver” is the literal translation of the Anglo-Saxon word *freoðuwebbe*, which in turn seems to be an accurate term to describe the role performed by the women in this system. These women worked to weave together the separate, often conflicting, threads of fathers, brothers, friends, husbands and enemies into a unified fabric of peace. Theoretically, she ensured the end of a feud because blood ties would encourage brothers and fathers not to attack the kingdoms of their sisters, daughters, nephews and grandsons. Those same blood ties also ensured that the Peace-weaver’s husband would not wish to attack the kingdom of his in-laws, or that his wife would be able to talk him out of the idea if he *did*. Lastly, it was hoped that the two kingdoms

would continue to be allied through bonds of kinship, and that the next generation would feel a strong familial sense of loyalty to the peoples of both parents.

In theory, it was a brilliant scheme, as the Peace-weaver was “uniquely capable” in her “potential to unify” the two families (Klaeber cv), because, “the body of a living child cannot be divided into the two halves of his parents, and thus as long as the child lives, so does the agreement between men, tribes, or nations, and any ‘peace-weaving’ will be successful” (Drout 207).

In actual practice, unfortunately, it seems that this happy result is seldom the case. Beyond producing an heir and allying two kingdoms, it was also a peace-weaver’s job to unite the men within her hall as well via gift-giving, the passing of the goblet, and her speech with them. Of peace-weavers we see in *Beowulf*, Wealhtheow is the only one whom we see in the actual act of peace-weaving, though Hygd also is seen carrying out some of the duties of a peace-weaver. In this chapter, I will discuss the connections between the peace-weavers, of whom most appear in digressions, and the roles they play in the poem.

Wealhtheow

Although Wealhtheow does not appear in any of the digressions, I will discuss her here in detail because I think that the other peace-weaver “digressions” draw from and offer insight into Wealhtheow’s words, actions and fate, and one must understand them all for the fullest understanding of any one of the peace-weaver stories.

It is fitting that, of all the women in *Beowulf*, Wealhtheow is the character with the most active role in the story because, she seems to most exemplify the role and duties

of a peace-weaver. Wealhtheow, described as “gold-hroden” (614a),¹⁰² and later as the “beaghroden cwen” (623a),¹⁰³ is first introduced at Beowulf’s welcome feast, where she performs the role of gracious hostess, bringing the mead cup to all the warriors, and welcoming Beowulf personally. When Beowulf makes his formal boast to kill Grendel, the poet tells us that, “[b]am wif þa word wel licodon gilpcwide Geates” (639-40a)¹⁰⁴ and then she takes her place at Hrothgar’s side, and then is next mentioned when Hrothgar “wolde... Wealhþeo secgan, cwen to gebeddan” (664-5a).¹⁰⁵ She is mentioned again the morning after Beowulf’s fight with Grendel when Hrothgar comes to the hall attended by Wealhtheow and a “mægþa hose” (923b),¹⁰⁶ but she does not have a significant role again until her speech after the Finnsburg episode.

After Beowulf defeats Grendel, Hrothgar offers Beowulf what amounts to a share to the throne of Denmark, saying:

Nu ic, Beowulf, þec,
 secg bet[e]sta, me for sunu wylle
 freogan on ferhþe; heald forð tela
 niwe sibbe. Ne bið þe [n]ænigre gad (946b-949).

[Now Beowulf, best of men, I wish to love you in my heart as a son; henceforth hold the new kinship well. You will lack nothing.]

By the time the celebratory feast begins, Wealhtheow seems to have been informed of Hrothgar’s statement. Her answer to Hrothgar’s offer is thick with the politics of succession, as she calls on him to remember their sons and nephew¹⁰⁷ and not to supplant

¹⁰² “Gold-adorned.”

¹⁰³ “Ring-adorned queen.”

¹⁰⁴ “The boasting words of the Geat pleased the lady very much.”

¹⁰⁵ “Desired to go to Wealhtheow, the queen as (his) bed-fellow.”

¹⁰⁶ “Troop of maidens.”

¹⁰⁷ Or quite possibly nephews, as the poet does not tell us anything about Heorowearð, other than that Hrothgar ignores his right to inherit his father Heorogar’s heirlooms, which either means that Hrothgar has blatantly robbed him of part of his inheritance, or that he is dead, and thus Hrothgar, as the oldest surviving relative to Heorogar, has every right to give them to whomever he wishes.

them by adopting Beowulf.¹⁰⁸ Then, as if to ensure that she has not offended Beowulf, she gives him great gifts, most notably a fabulous necklace, praises his deeds, and solicits his guidance and support for her sons, says “wes þenden þu lifige, æþeling, eadig” (1224b-5a)¹⁰⁹ and “ic þe an tela sincgestreona” (1225b-1226a).¹¹⁰ Wealhtheow is mentioned only once more, and only in passing possibly as part of a group, when Beowulf brings Grendel’s head back to Heorot, and the poet remarks that it was “egeslice for eorlum and þære idese mid, wliteseon wrætlic” (1649-50a).¹¹¹ However, Wealhtheow’s presence is assumption only: one would *expect* the Queen to be one of the women in the hall when Beowulf brings back Grendel’s head, but the poem does not clearly state that she was there.

Though she commands our attention for such a brief period of time, Wealhtheow exhibits all the traits of a peace-weaver, and a good one at that. If we follow the leads of Francis Gummere (50) and Helen Damico (22-4) and look to *Maxims I* from *The Exeter Book* (c. late 900s) we see how a queen appears to have been expected to behave, and see how well these words apply to Wealhtheow.

...ond wif geþeon

leof mid hyre leodum, leohtmod wesan,
 rune healdan, rumheort beon
 mearum ond maþmum, meodorædenne

¹⁰⁸ One last curious feature of this scene is the seating arrangements and their implications. Unfortunately, there is no way to definitively prove who decided them, but if it was Hrothgar it might indicate that he wished Beowulf to be viewed as his son by association, since he is sitting “be þæm gebroðrum twæm” [between the two brothers] (1191). Conversely, if Wealhtheow placed him there, she may well have been visually demonstrating the plan she hopes will be carried out, with Beowulf advising and supporting her sons, rather than being placed above them with Hrothulf and Hrothgar.

¹⁰⁹ “Be you blessed, prince, as long as you live.”

¹¹⁰ “I wish you well of these treasures.” There is some evidence to suggest that the Necklace of the Brosings was cursed, and because of this unfortunate possibility, scholars have wondered whether or not Wealhtheow gave it to Beowulf knowingly. I will discuss Wealhtheow’s gift and the possibility of its curse in the following pages.

¹¹¹ “A terrible, wondrous sight for the warriors with their ladies among them.”

for gesiðmægen symle æghwær
eodor æþelinga ærest gegretan,

forman fulle to frean hond
ricene geræcan, ond him ræd witan
boldagendum bæm ætsomne (lines 84b-92).

[...and the lady flourishes beloved with her people, she is easy-going, holds secrets, is generous with horses and with treasures, in the dealing out of mead in every case, in the presence of the band of warriors at feast, she greets the lord of princes first, first the cup to the lord's hand she quickly presents, and knows council for him both together possessing a house.]

Wealhtheow is a gracious hostess; we see her bringing Hrothgar the mead-cup first, as she ought, and her gifts to Beowulf are certainly generous. Additionally, we see her give Hrothgar her council on the matter of Scylding inheritance. Furthermore, she has borne Hrothgar three children, Hrethric, Hrothmund and Freawaru, and we see her looking out for the interests of her sons and nephew – thus fulfilling her duties both as a Helming and a Scylding by marriage.

Though we cannot be absolutely certain of Wealhtheow's original home, the evidence of her name points fairly strongly to a non-Danish heritage, as it possibly means "foreign/Celtic slave" (Klaeber liv n. 1, 472),¹¹² and she is called "ides Helminga" (620b),¹¹³ which again indicates that she was not a native of the country she ruled. It has been argued that Helming refers to Helm Wulfing, who appears in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Widsith*, and thus Wealhtheow is linked to the East Anglian house of the Wulfings

¹¹² In his article "The feminine name *Wealhtheow* and the problem of *Beowulfian* anthroponymy," Stefan Jurasinki expresses concern that too much is being read into the meaning of "Wealhtheow," and suggests, in agreement with Cecily Clark, that "it is characteristic of most names to become 'semantically emptied' and 'to draw partly aloof from the language at large'" (Jurasinki 708). While Jurasinki and Clark do raise a valid concern, I believe that (together with the reference to the Helmings/Wulfings and the Norse analogues placing the origin of Roas/Hróarr's wife in England) the meaning of Wealhtheow's name has importance, and signifies that she did indeed come from a foreign land – whether or not that land was England is irrelevant. All we need to know is that she was not a Dane.

¹¹³ "The lady of the Helmings."

(liv). Such a connection between names, and fact that a number of Scandinavian analogues give Hrothgar an English queen, makes me think that an East Anglian Wealhtheow is not, perhaps, as far-fetched as it might seem. Looking beyond the Anglo-Saxon sources, we find that Roas in the *Skjoldunga saga* (Garmonsway 129) and Hróar in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, both analogues for Hrothgar, are explicitly said to marry an English princess, *Hrólfs saga kraka* even goes so far as to say that this English princess was the daughter of the king of Norðri with whom Hróar ruled, though her name is Qgn not Wealhtheow (17).¹¹⁴ However, Damico also puts forth Erik Björkman’s argument that Wealhtheow’s name is possibly suggestive of “a southern – more particularly, a Frankish – territory as her place of origin” (Damico 63), but Damico, E.V. Gordon and even Björkman himself find such a reading problematic in the face of the Wulfing/Helming connection (64).

However, Wealhtheow’s importance lies not so much in her place of origin as in her words and deeds within the poem. The two most significant features of Wealhtheow’s role I would like to discuss are her peace-weaving between the Helmings or the Wulfings and the Scyldings, and then between the various members of the Scyldings and Beowulf. Whether the Scyldings were ever at war with the Helmings or Wulfings, Wealhtheow has done her duty as a daughter and wife. Her people do not seem to be at war with her husbands’, and she has born not one son, but two who further unite the families, and a daughter who can and will in turn be a peace weaver for her father. Moreover, she is

¹¹⁴ “Konungr hét Norðri; hann réð fyrir nokkurum hluta Englands; hans dóttir hét Qgn. Hróarr var löngum með Norðra konungi ... ok um síðir gekk Hróarr at eiga Qgn ok settiz þar at ríki með Norðra konungi mági sínum.” [(There was a) king named Norðri; he ruled over a certain part of England; his daughter was called Qgn. Hróarr was long with King Norðri ... at last Hróarr came to have Qgn and settled there to rule with King Norðri his father-in-law] (lines 9 and 13-14).

called the “freolicu folccwen” (641a),¹¹⁵ Hrothgar has had no reason to put her aside, as we will later see Ingeld do to her daughter Freawaru, and the approval with which her gift-giving to Beowulf is met seems to indicate that the Danes admire her actions. Thus far, she is successful.

Within the poem itself, we witness Wealhtheow champion Hrothgar’s sons and heirs in her address to Hrothgar. She begins by offering Hrothgar the mead cup and telling him to “on sælum wes” and “beo wið Geatas glæd” (1170b and 1171b),¹¹⁶ but then says “me man sægde þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde hereri[n]c habban” (1175-6b).¹¹⁷ Her tone is undeniably reproachful, as she continues by reminding Hrothgar that though he is old (“bruc þenden þu mote manigra medo” (1177b-8a)¹¹⁸) and that he will soon “forð scyle” (1179b)¹¹⁹ and “worold oflættest” (1183b).¹²⁰ Hrothgar has *magum* (1178b):¹²¹ he is not without an heir. During this part of her speech, Wealhtheow uses the dual personal pronouns *uncran* (1185) and *wit* (1186a). By using the dual forms it is possible that Wealhtheow is evoking the terms of the alliance with the Helmings/Wulfings, which would have been formed on the understanding that a child of the two of them, half Helming/Wulfing, half Scylding, would become king. They have not one son but two. To pass them over in favour of Beowulf could be seen as breaking the treaty, whether or not the Helmings/Wulfings would retaliate. Her emphasis on kin and *their* sons would seem to indicate that her family has an interest in the succession of the two boys, and that the Helmings, whether Frankish or English, are powerful (else why would Hrothgar ally

¹¹⁵ “Excellent queen of the folk.”

¹¹⁶ “Be in joy” and “Be glad with the Geats.”

¹¹⁷ “Men say to me that you would have this leader of armies as a son.”

¹¹⁸ “Enjoy while you may the many rewards.”

¹¹⁹ “Shall away.”

¹²⁰ “Leave the world.”

¹²¹ “Kinsmen.”

himself with them). Moreover, I do not think that Wealhtheow perceives Beowulf himself as a threat. Rather, the threat comes from Hrothgar trying to adopt an outsider (really anyone not a Scylding) as Sam Newton argues when he says that he “does not see that these lines (ll.1175-56a) necessarily imply that Wealþeow views Beowulf as a threat” (93 *n.77*).

However, even if Wealhtheow and Hrothgar had *not* had two sons, there is still at least one Scylding heir not only living, but also present in the hall. Hrothgar’s nephew Hrothulf is there, and old enough to act as regent when Hrothgar dies, which is presumably what Wealhtheow means when she says “he þa geogoðe wile arum healdan” (1181b-1182a).¹²² There seem to be several implications in Wealhtheow’s comments about Hrothulf. First, even if Hrothgar’s sons are not old enough to fight for their inheritance against Beowulf, Hrothulf certainly is, and he would make the ideal leader for any Danes discontented with a foreign ruler. Second, Wealhtheow is aware that Hrothgar is old, and that when he dies, her sons may not yet be of an age to rule, whereas Hrothulf is already. Lastly, perhaps it is a desperate bid to force Hrothulf to publicly promise to care for her sons so that he is bound by his sworn words to fulfill the duty which blood and honor should, but might not necessarily, compel him to perform. The political position of Wealhtheow’s sons is precarious, and she knows it; hence the manner in which she speaks of Hrothulf. Her language is forceful: she is certain Hrothulf will do well by their sons (1181b-2a) because it is the only way to adequately repay the *wordmyndum* (1186b)¹²³ and *arna* (1187b)¹²⁴ they gave him as a child despite the potential threat he posed to the succession of their own children. For Hrothulf to act in

¹²² “He will hold the young warriors in honor.”

¹²³ “Honors.”

¹²⁴ “Kindness/help.”

any other way would be ungrateful and dishonorable, but she knows he is gracious.

Wealhtheow's declaration of faith in Hrothulf in front of all those present at the feast may also be a way of using the public presence to shame Hrothulf into behaving as he ought or risk seeming ungrateful and ignoble.

Because, as discussed in Chapter 1, it is possible (though I believe unlikely) that Hrothulf did turn on his cousins and seize the throne, scholars have viewed

Wealhtheow's attempt to maintain the succession by relying on Hrothulf with pity, scorn or even derision. However, she did the best she could under the circumstances.

Wealhtheow and Hrothgar have raised Hrothulf in a manner befitting his station, and have treated him with honour, despite the potential threat he poses to their sons. If the

fostering of Hrothulf was perhaps a risky political move, from a moral and familial standpoint it was the right thing to do, because if nothing else, Hrothulf now owes

Hrothgar and Wealhtheow his loyalty as an honored family member. To have killed or exiled him would have been morally problematic, and if Wealhtheow had insisted on his

banishment or death, she could well have been hated for her treatment of her husband's kinsman. Moreover, if she is really the gracious and generous queen that the poet has so

far presented, it is likely that she has given Hrothulf gifts in reward for his service.

Regardless, Hrothulf not only owes Hrothgar and Wealhtheow his loyalty for the care they have given him but also his loyalty as a retainer of the King. Wealhtheow has done a

good deal to secure his good will and gratitude. It now lies with Hrothulf to reciprocate both in an appropriate manner – a fact of which Wealhtheow reminds him in her speech.

If Hrothulf is noble and true, he will repay them well by treating his cousins with honor

and allowing them to ascend the throne. There is very little short of having him killed that

Wealhtheow can do that she has not already done. In a culture which so valued honor, the lengths to which the queen relies upon Hrothulf's seems justified.

If Hrothulf does indeed seize power, Wealhtheow certainly deserves our pity, but not, I think, our scorn. She has done her duty as best she could with the situation she was given, producing sons and maintaining peace between her country of birth and of marriage, and the ball is effectively in Hrothulf's court. If Hrothulf were indeed to seize control, such a reading would place the Scylding queen in a triple-bind – a situation which the Anglo-Saxons seem to have especially enjoyed hearing about as can be seen from the position of Beorhtnoth at the Battle of Maldon, when Beowulf faces the dragon, and the fate that ensnares nearly every peace-weaver – where characters find themselves in positions of conflict between personal loyalties and impersonal laws, customs and fate. However, as discussed previously, it is equally possible that Hrothulf does not in fact kill his cousins, and that Wealhtheow's trust is well placed.

After reminding Hrothgar of his responsibility to his kinsmen, and Hrothulf of his honor-bound duty to do well by his cousins, Wealhtheow speaks to Beowulf. She gives him many lavish gifts, including a necklace so fine that the poet knows of only one greater, the Necklace of the Brosings which, according to the Scandinavian stories in *Þrymskviða* (possibly tenth century), *Skáldskaparmál*, *Gylfaginning* (from Snorri's Edda) and *Sörlapátttr* (c. 1300-50)(Garmonsway 297-300), belonged to the goddess Freyja. But more importantly, after wishing him prosperity and happiness, she also asks that he be “þyssonum cnyhtum wes lara liðe” (1219b-20a)¹²⁵ and “suna minum dædum gedefe”

¹²⁵ “Kind of council to these boys.”

(1226b-7a).¹²⁶ She also tells him that “druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde” (1231),¹²⁷ seeming to indicate that she expects Beowulf to do likewise.

From Beowulf’s actions and later speech to Hrothgar about Hrethric, it would appear that he listened. We are told of no direct response to Hrothgar’s offer, though as Beowulf returns to Geatland, we can assume that he did not accept it. However, as Newton points out, in his speech to Hrothgar before his departure, “Beowulf seems to consider Hreðric to be a young man of worth... and signals his solidarity with him by offering him friendship” (97), and Malone says that: “when Beowulf invites Hreðric to the Geatish court, and promises Hroðgar military support, he is definitely allying himself with Hroðgar and his sons.... The queen, to that extent, has not exerted herself in vain” (“Hrethric” 273). Even if Beowulf’s tacit refusal of Hrothgar’s offer is due to his unswerving loyalty to his uncle, Hygelac, his explicit remark that Hrethric “mæg þær fela freonda findan” (1837b-8a)¹²⁸ in “hofum Geata” (1836)¹²⁹ would suggest that Wealhtheow was indeed successful in her request to Beowulf at least. If nothing else, as Shippey says, “whatever one thinks of the implications of Wealhtheow’s speech in lines 1169-87... we hear nothing more of this from anyone” (16). Wealhtheow’s speech must have made an impression on Beowulf because of his actions after Hygelac’s death. After Hygelac dies in the manner we have just heard, Hygd makes Beowulf a very similar offer to Hrothgar’s – to take the throne in place of her young son. Beowulf refuses, instead offering his council and support to the young king in lines 2370-9a. If so, then Wealhtheow’s words here have a far-reaching effect on Beowulf’s life.

¹²⁶ “Gentle in deeds to my sons.”

¹²⁷ “Having drunk, the warriors do as I bid.”

¹²⁸ “May find many friends there.”

¹²⁹ “The court of the Geats.”

The last piece of Wealhtheow's story we must consider is the "healsbeaga mæst" (1195)¹³⁰ which she gives to Beowulf. The poet says that the gift was:

...healsbeaga mæst
þara þe ic on foldan gefrægen hæbbe.
Nænigne ic under swegle selran hyrde
Hordmaððum hæleþa syþðan Hama ætwæg
Toþære byrhtan byrig Brosinga mene,
Sigle ond sincfæt – searoniðas fleah
Eormenrices, geceas ecne ræd (lines 1195-1111).

[...the greatest of neck-rings that I have learned about on earth. I heard that no better jewel of warriors (was) under the sky since Hama carried away the necklace of the Brosings to the shining stronghold, necklace and costly object – obtained Eormenric's cunning enmity, reached everlasting benefit.]

By evoking the Necklace of the Brosings, the poet shows us just what a mighty gift Wealhtheow has bestowed on Beowulf. However, the Necklace of the Brosings was also said to be cursed for a period of time, which could mean that by using the necklace as his reference point, the poet was hinting that Wealhtheow's gift to Beowulf is similarly cursed. Mary Dockray-Miller argues that although Wealhtheow's speech is "a perfectly acceptable and conventional phrase of gift-giving... it does not sound like it to the poem's audience, for the poet has just given the past and future history of the necklace" (112). Wealhtheow thus knowingly passes on "one of her richest treasures" giving him "the death and feud that accompany it" (ibid). This interpretation, I think, is unlikely. Given the lengths to which Wealhtheow goes to secure Beowulf's good will and support for her sons, it is difficult to believe that, having attained both, she would then knowingly send him back to Geatland with a cursed necklace. Furthermore, though Hygelac is explicitly said to have been wearing it when he was killed, it would seem that it was "for

¹³⁰ "The greatest of neck-rings."

wlenco...ahsode, fæhðe to Frysum” (1210)¹³¹ hinting perhaps that his was a haughty spirit going to his destruction rather than an innocent victim being sent to his unfortunate demise by the curse of a magic necklace. It is still entirely possible that the necklace *was* cursed, but it seems unlikely that Wealhtheow had any knowledge that it was.

In these scenes, Wealhtheow has demonstrated the way in which a peace-weaver may work: giving praise, council and gifts to those around her, and sons to her king. She also presents us with the most successful example of peace-weaving in *Beowulf*. Even though she is unable to prevent either the burning of Heorot or Hrothulf’s (perhaps) sudden but inevitable betrayal, I have argued that such an outcome is not her fault. I will argue shortly that the disintegration of the peace-treaty with the Heathobards is also not her responsibility, but that of her daughter, Freawaru. This deterioration of the peace in Heorot, through no fault of her own, recalls to mind the words of Beowulf himself, “lytle hwile bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge” (2030b-1).¹³² It would seem that the peace-weavers and their deeds are doomed to failure.

Hildeburh

If Wealhtheow, with all her success, is touched by failure, then Hildeburh is utterly overwhelmed by it. Nearly everything that *could* go wrong for her does. Coming directly before Wealhtheow’s first entrance, the Finnsburg Episode appears in the form of a song sung by Hrothgar’s *scop* at the feast following Beowulf’s victory over Grendel. While the Episode foreshadows the occurrences in the Heathobard Digression, it also could be viewed as a harbinger of a more immediate evil in the form of Grendel’s mother. The song ends, and the listening Danes go to sleep, expecting peace for the first

¹³¹ “Because of pride (that he) sought the feud in Frisia.”

¹³² “The deadly spear rests (only) a little while, though the bride is capable.”

time in a long while, unaware that the vengeance of a mother is about to befall them – rather like the Danes went to Finnsburg, likely without expecting the renewal of the feud. Moreover, there are parallels between the two sets of feuds; between the Danes and Frisians and Beowulf/the Danes and Grendel/Grendel’s mother. In both cases, morning brings shock and horror, and the realization that a beloved friend/kinsman is dead. Hildeburh is a “geomuru ides” (1075b)¹³³ having lost “æt þam lindplegan bearnum ond broðrum” (1073b-4a)¹³⁴ and Hrothgar is “on hreon mode syðþan he aldorþegn unlyfigendne, þone deorestan deadne wisse” (1307a-09).¹³⁵ Likewise, Hildeburh’s marriage to Finn and Beowulf’s slaying of Grendel were supposed to end the bloodshed, but in both cases the well-meaning actions only brought more death. In the former case it lead to the annihilation of the Frisians and the death of most of the Danes at Finnsburg, including the king, and in the latter, the death of Æschere. As comparisons go between the situation at Finnsburg and that of Beowulf and Grendel, is not, perhaps, the strongest or most compelling, but it certainly is a possibility.

It could also be, as Mary Dockray-Miller argues, that the Finnsburg story was famous for having a son whose arm was cut off. This explanation would thus make sense for the *scop* to choose such a story in this context, since Grendel’s arm is currently hung up in the gables of Heorot. Furthermore, the Finsburg Episode would serve as foreshadowing by the poet because there is a sorrowing mother, reuniting arm and son on a funeral bier, thus explaining *eame on eaxle* (1117). Dockray-Miller argues that both arm retrievals (first by Grendel’s mother and then by Hildeburh) are “final maternal performances, the Seawolf’s to defend her home and her son’s body, Hildeburh’s to

¹³³ “Mournful lady.”

¹³⁴ “Sons and Brothers in that shield-play.”

¹³⁵ “Troubled in mind since he knew, the dearest chief-thane, was dead (and) still.”

dignify her son's death and reassemble his corpse" (Dockray-Miller 99). Such a scenario would also account for the "very clear...reading of *earm*" as it appears in the manuscript (ibid). At first glance, the theory seems impossibly far-fetched, but the closer one looks, the more reasonable it seems to be.

Another better possibility lies in a comparison between Hildeburh and Wealhtheow in which Newton argues that "the sudden shift of Hildeburh's emotional state from peace to anguish...implies that the same... 'reversal,' could be destined for Wealhtheow" (90). Malone argued that, "the tragedy of one reminds [the poet] of the tragedy of the other" ("Hrethric" 269). One reading put forward by W.W. Lawrence sees Hildeburh and the Finnsburg episode as a way creating "ironical overtones" and as well as referring forward to the "'melancholy destiny' of Wealhtheow's daughter" (Damico 19), and that the episode drew Hildeburh's fate "designedly into connection with the tragedy in store for Queen Wealhtheow" (Lawrence 126). Such comparisons between Hildeburh and Wealhtheow draw parallels between the dissolution of the alliance between the Danes and Heathobards and the internal conflict among the Danes, as well as the parallels between the digressions and the main text. At the outset, the situations are not the same, as one is a feud between former enemies, and the other is a struggle between cousins and members of the same ruling house, but in the end, both conflicts cause the death of a son and the partial or total loss of political stability.

Although I think certain aspects Wealhtheow's and Hildeburh's fates do make good parallels,¹³⁶ I think such a comparison does not fit as completely because in Wealhtheow's case, whether or not it is Ingeld or Hrothulf who cause warfare and

¹³⁶ Both are from foreign lands, have borne sons, have presided over a period of peace before a third party (Heathobard, Jute or other Danes) destroys it. They also both lose a son.

feuding to rage in Heorot, it is certainly not Wealhtheow's own people, the Helmings. Rather, I believe it serves as a dual warning – first of the grief of a mother for her son in the form of Grendel's mother, and second of the fate that awaits Freawaru.

Freawaru

Like the Finnsburg Episode, the Heathobard Digression (lines 2020-2069) could be seen as a double warning, both of the impending disaster awaiting Hygelac, and of the much more distant dragon fight. It also serves to demonstrate Beowulf's wisdom and the insight which perhaps led the Geat to avoid the destruction that befell Ingeld's and Finn's peoples, but which may have also contributed to his failure to provide an heir to his throne. It is also worth noting that the Finnsburg Episode is recounted at approximately the same time that Beowulf would have seen Freawaru in Hrothgar's hall, even though her presence is not mentioned until nearly a thousand lines later. The Heathobard Digression occurs after Beowulf returns to Geatland, and recounts the story of his deeds to Hygelac. Beowulf tells Hygelac how Hrothgar's daughter, whom he has heard is named Freawaru, "hwilum for duguðe ...eorlum on ende ealuwæge bær" (lines 2020-1).¹³⁷

He explains that Freawaru is betrothed to Ingeld the lord of the Heathobards to settle a feud,¹³⁸ and then lays out what he believes will happen when the wedding occurs.

At the feast, one of Ingeld's older retainers will recognize one of Freawaru's young

¹³⁷ "At times ... in the presence of the old retainers bore the ale cup to the earls in line."

¹³⁸ Presumably marriage alliance created between friendly or at least neutral neighbors were less fraught with tension and depended less on the political acumen of the peace-weaver than did a marriage between formerly feuding tribes, as the former while certainly having to *keep* the harmony between families, did not have to smooth over the hatreds which resulted from the feud. Certainly any visit between the two groups must have been fraught with tension.

thanes as the son of a warrior involved in the feud between the Scyldings and the Heathobards. With bitter words the old warrior will instigate a fight between a younger Heathobard and Frewarau's thane, which ends in the death of the Dane and the escape of the Heathobard. Then Beowulf says, whatever love Ingeld had for Freawaru will dissipate. Beowulf's view of the alliance seems rather cynical, but perhaps given the stories of Hildeburh, Freawaru and possibly even Hygd and Wealhtheow, his cynicism is justified.

In the case of Freawaru and Ingeld, certainly, the peace-weaving system collapses rather spectacularly, due to what Lawrence calls "the impudence and tactlessness" of the Danish thanes in wearing "the sword and armour of a Heathobard warrior, slain in past feuds" (81). But if the alliances in *Beowulf* are anything to go by, the unions were often desperately shaky and easily destroyed, with much bloodshed and grief on both sides.

In Freawaru's case, at least, there does seem to be some love involved, which intensifies the personal side in the conflict between duty and personal desires, as it is said of Ingeld: "weallað wælniðas, on him wiflufan æfter cearwælmum colran weorðað" (lines 2065-6).¹³⁹ Love could hardly have cooled if there had been none to begin with. As Chambers puts it, "the tragic figure of Ingeld, hesitating between love for his father and love for his wife, between the duty of vengeance and his plighted word, was one which was sure to attract the interest of the old heroic poets more even than those of the victorious uncle and nephew" (*Beowulf* 22). Here again is that conflict between conflicting personal ties about which the Anglo-Saxons seem so interested. Ingeld is trapped in a double bind, forced to choose between personal love of his wife, the oaths he

¹³⁹ "Deadly hate will surge, and for him the love of the woman after seething sorrows becomes cool."

has made with Hrothgar, and his obligation as a warrior, a king and a son to avenge the blood of his father and people. Essentially, he is trapped in a lose-lose situation.

There are no analogues in which the name Freawaru appears,¹⁴⁰ but Saxo Grammaticus does tell a story similar to Beowulf's, wherein Hrólfr Kraki's sister Ruta (or Hrút) is to marry the son of Ingeld (here Ingel) rather than Ingeld himself. However, while the exact details are different, there is a very similar outcome between Freawaru's story and Ruta's.

Very early on in *Beowulf*, the reader learns that Heorot's destruction will arrive when the enmity between *apumsweoran* (line 84)¹⁴¹ leads to *heaðowylma* (82).¹⁴² Beowulf himself elaborates upon these cryptic statements saying: "bioð (ab)rocene on ba healfe aðsweord eorla...æfter cearwælmu"¹⁴³ and he "Heaðo-Beardna hyldo ne telge, dryhtsibbe dæl Denum unfæcne, freondscipe fæstne" (2063, 2066).¹⁴⁴ *Widsith* also mentions the incident, saying:

Hroþwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon lengest
sibbe ætsomne suhtorfædran,
siþþan hy forwræcon Wicinga cynn
ond Ingeldes ord forbigdan,
forheowan, æt Heorote Heaðo-Beardna þrym (lines 45-9).

[For the longest time, Hrothulf and Hrothgar, uncle and nephew united, held in friendship, when they drove forth the kin of the Wicings and humiliated the flower of Ingeld's men, cut down the host of the Heathobards at Heorot.]

Not only are the same characters mentioned, but the scenario is nearly identical in all but a few specific details. *Widsith* does not say that Ingeld and Hrothgar are son-in-law and

¹⁴⁰ Like her mother, Freawaru has an interesting name. Unlike the rest of the Scyldings, her name does not alliterate on 'h,' and it appears nowhere else. Malone argues that Freawaru means "Lord and protector" (or in this instance, "Lady and protector," following in the tradition of names like Helm (40-42).

¹⁴¹ "Son-in-law and father-in-law."

¹⁴² "Violent flame."

¹⁴³ "The oaths of warriors will be broken on both sides... after the welling up of care."

¹⁴⁴ "Do[es] not consider the friendship of the Heathobards, the part of peace, the firm friendship with the Danes (to be) without deceit."

father-in-law mentioned. *Beowulf* leaves out, at first, any explicit statement as to the identity of the son-in-law, but from Beowulf's later comments to Hygelac it can be interpreted that Ingeld is the son-in-law mentioned. In both instances, the scenario is the Scyldings versus the Heathobards, with the Heathobards coming out of the fight much the worse for the meeting despite the burning of Heorot.

In book two of Saxo Grammaticus' *Historia Danorum*, Rolf's sister Ruta is married to Agner, son of Ingel, and a fight breaks out at their wedding feast. As at Freawaru's wedding feast, this fight escalates quickly, and Agner is killed. Here the parallel ends, as Ruta is then married off to Biarki, one of Rolf's champions. Rolf's *other* sister, Skuld however, is married off to Hiarvarth, who is made governor of Sweden. It is Skuld who plots the attack on Leire, because she was "tributariae solutionis pudore permota"¹⁴⁵ to her brother (52, 16). There is a terrific night battle at Leire, and unlike the battle in *Beowulf*, the attackers win, and all of Rolf's men are killed (61, 12). The differences are, of course that Ruta is married to the son of Ingeld rather than Ingeld himself, and she is the sister of Hrothulf, not his cousin.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, Ruta's husband is killed at the feast by Biarki, who afterwards marries her, and lastly the destruction of Heorot comes from an entirely different set of in-laws.

Perplexingly, in Book Six of his history, Saxo tells of Ingel, son of Frothi, and his wife, who though occupying Freawaru/Ruta's place as his wife, is the daughter of Sverting,¹⁴⁷ and is of Saxon heritage. In this story, the Saxons are being bitterly

¹⁴⁵ "Deeply disturbed by the shame of paying tribute."

¹⁴⁶ Though as Malone points out, "since Freawaru was actually the foster-sister of Hrothulf... the appearance of her counterpart Hrút as Hrothulf's true sister makes no serious difficulties" (43).

¹⁴⁷ Hygelac is called "nefa Swertinges," meaning "nephew or grandson of Swerting" (1203), in *Beowulf*, placing Swerting in an altogether different family and location – Geatish rather than Saxon – and the enemy of the Danes rather than the ancestor of one of their allies.

oppressed by the Danes, led by Frothi, so Hanef leads an open attack against Frothi and is killed. Sverting too is outraged by the treatment his people are receiving, but instead of an open strike, he moves through cunning and trickery, of which Saxo strongly disapproves (156, 23) despite his motivations being as good as Hanef's. Sverting is more successful than Hanef and succeeds in killing Frothi though he too is slain at Frothi's hand. Frothi's son Ingel becomes king. Starkather, the main character of the section, rails against Ingel, saying that he "totum petulantissimi luxus illecebris mancipavit" (157, 3),¹⁴⁸ and that "Paterna avitaeque decora foedissimarum libidinum assuetudine polluebat"¹⁴⁹ and "clarissimos maiorum titulos improbissimis obscurabat operibus" (ibid)¹⁵⁰ and carries in this tone for another good paragraph.

Fearing the king's revenge for the death of their father, the sons of Sverting offer Frothi their sister in marriage, essentially as a peace-weaver, to halt the bloodshed between the two families. The offer is accepted, and Frothi marries the daughter of Sverting. Starkather has left the court in disgust, but when he returns, he turns his vitriol upon the unnamed daughter of Sverting, accusing her of lowering the moral quality of the entire court with lavish feasts and entertainment. But above all, Starkather hates the peace Ingel has made with the sons of Sverting. Saxo says that Starkather "praesenti beneficio pristinae titulum antepone non dubitaret" (68, 11).¹⁵¹ Like Ingeld's elderly thane in *Beowulf* goading a younger warrior into killing one of Freawaru's thanes, Starkather goads Ingel to such an extent that he is moved to kill Sverting's sons in his hall. While the characterizations of Ingeld and Freawaru are very different from the ones in *Beowulf*,

¹⁴⁸ "His mind surrendered completely to the allurements of wanton luxury."

¹⁴⁹ "He polluted the glories of (his) father and grandfather with the practices of most loathsome pleasure."

¹⁵⁰ "He darkened the brightest distinctions of his ancestors with the most wicked deeds."

¹⁵¹ "He did not hesitate to set the title of former close friendship before present benefit."

the feud between Ingel's family and Sverting's, the marriage and peace and then the renewal of the feud, when taken with the fight at Heorot create a story similar to the Heathobard Digression.

Moreover, many of the "digressions" serve to introduce historical aspects to the poem, or to act as hints of what may come. The Finnsburg Episode and the Heathobard Digression do a bit of both. There are striking parallels between Freawaru and Hildeburh, both in their characters and in their stories. Both women are married off to foreign kings to settle long-running feuds, both experience the disintegration of these peace pledges due to the actions of their retainers, and both lose family in the resulting conflicts. Furthermore, we again see tales in which characters find themselves in positions of conflict between intense personal family ties and the impersonal structure of law and customs, which is just what we find at work here. The Anglo-Saxon appreciation for the "doomed if you do, doomed if you don't" outlook is especially clear in these two "digressions."¹⁵²

The parallels between the stories of Hildeburh and Freawaru are by no means a discovery of my own. For example, Lawrence (127), Malone ("Freawaru" 42) and others argue that the presence of the Finnsburg Episode was meant to draw parallels between the ultimately disastrous union of Finn and Hildeburh and the marriage of Ingeld and Freawaru, which is likely to be equally unsuccessful. Not only are there parallels between these two marriages, but there is also a balance provided at the first mention of the

¹⁵² Most famously there is Beorhtnoth's stand at the Battle of Maldon where scholars have argued back and forth about whether or not Beorhtnoth should have let the Vikings cross to the mainland or not. The double-bind applies to him because he could either have refused to let the Vikings cross and risked dishonor, and the possibility that they would depart for different, undefended location or let them cross, fighting with honor, but risking defeat. Similarly there is Beowulf's fight with the dragon, and scholars argue over whether or not he ought to have fought alone, not to mention the issues with peace-weaving and feuds.

Heathobard-Scylding feud at the very beginning of the poem (lines 81-5), the Finnsburg Episode, which occurs roughly one third of the way through (lines 1063-1159), and the Heathobard Digression, which falls near the two-thirds point (lines 2020-2069).

Beyond sharing a quasi-historical nature, these two stories have similar presentations and content in common. They are both told to an audience, the Episode as a song to the company of Danes and Geats, the digression as a “prophesy” of sorts to Hygelac and Hygd. In both cases, the marriages are primarily for political alliances: Hildeburh is married to Finn presumably to heal some feud or to create an alliance with a strong neighbour, and Freawaru is to be married to Ingeld *expressly* to heal a feud between the Danes and the Heathobards. As Beowulf tells Hygelac,

Sio gehaten is
geong goldhroden, gladum suna Frodan...
þæt he mid ðy wife wælfæða dæl,
sæcca gesette (lines 2024b-5 and 2028).

[She, the young, gold adorned one, is betrothed to Froda’s gracious son...so that he, by means of that wife, may settle the share of the deadly feud.]

Beowulf at least appears to doubt the efficacy of marriage as a means to end feuds, and not only does Beowulf remain sceptical, but the poet continuously presents examples of failed peace-weaving throughout the poem. Here we are met with what the Anglo-Saxon culture *should* be, and what it actually is.

Hygd

As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Hygd is the only other peace-weaver other than Wealhtheow to appear outside of a “digression.” She is Hygelac’s queen, and thus Beowulf’s aunt by marriage. We also learn, as soon as we meet her, that

Hygd is “swiðe geong” (1926)¹⁵³ and only “wintra lyt under burhlocan” (1927b-2928a),¹⁵⁴ though already she is praised as being *wis* (1927)¹⁵⁵ (in fact Alaric Hall and others argue that her name itself means “thought” and is a contrast to Hygelac’s which as we have seen may mean something like “lack of thought”) and *welþungen* (ibid).¹⁵⁶ Hygd “næs hio hnah . . . ne to gneað gifa Geata leodum” (1929a-30),¹⁵⁷ like Wealhtheow she cares for the company in the hall, and like Wealhtheow, she enlists Beowulf’s help for her son. Furthermore, the two women are connected by the “healsbeaga mæst” (line 1195b).¹⁵⁸ However unlike Wealhtheow, Hygd *wants* Beowulf to take the throne once Hygelac is dead in fact, she goes so far as to offer it to him, passing over her own son because “bearne ne truwoðe, þæt he wið ælfylcum eþelstolas healdan cuðe” (2371b-2372a).¹⁵⁹ Given how young her son must have been at Hygelac’s death, it is perhaps not surprising that she wanted Beowulf, a tried warrior, most likely at the apex of his strength, to lead the Geats while the war with the Franks was still fresh in everyone’s minds. Moreover, while Beowulf was an outsider in the Danish court, Beowulf is Hygelac’s sister-son, and thus is in fact a legitimate heir of the Geatish throne.

In addition to these personal similarities between Hygd and Wealhtheow, there are positional similarities. Hygd plays the equivalent part to Wealhtheow. Beowulf arrives in the hall and is greeted by the king and queen. The queen carries wine to the warriors, is gold-adorned, wise and a good diplomat. She has born, or will bear a son to her lord, thus providing an heir, and is in possession of a dazzling neck ring, second only

¹⁵³ “Very young.”

¹⁵⁴ “Few winters within the walled town.”

¹⁵⁵ “Wise.”

¹⁵⁶ “Accomplished.”

¹⁵⁷ “Was not illiberal. . . nor too grudging of gifts for the Geatish people.”

¹⁵⁸ “The greatest of neck-rings.”

¹⁵⁹ “She did not have faith in the child, that he would know (how) to guard the ancestral throne against foreign armies.”

to the Necklace of the Brosings. She has a conversation about inheritance with Beowulf after the later has performed great feats of arms, though the outcomes of these conversations are different.

As I argued in the case of Wealhtheow, the “success” or “failure” of a peace-weaver had very little to do with the women themselves. As Beowulf observes, “seldan hwær æfter leodhryre lytle hwile bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge” (2029-31b).¹⁶⁰ Rather, circumstances and prior events determine the outcome. For example, although we know almost nothing about Hygd’s background, and though she seems all but perfect, she is doomed. Hygelac will later be killed in battle with the Franks, yet in spite of this tragedy, Hygd will maintain her grace, dignity, and sense of duty to the people, even to the point of offering power to a more experienced and better candidate over her own less-experienced son Heardred. Beowulf refuses, choosing instead to act as Heardred's counselor, but then disaster strikes again and Hygd loses Heardred in battle too. This tragic series of events occurs in a career that could be seen, like Wealhtheow’s as *successful*. Hygd's country of origin was not at war with the Geats, and yet war overwhelmed both her husband and her son. Even the peace weavers who enjoyed “success” were doomed. Here, as in his interactions with the Swedes and other Geats, Beowulf’s actions shape the history occurring around him.

Modthryth and *Onelan cwen*

The last two peace-weavers to be discussed are Modthryth and Onela’s queen. All we are know about the latter in *Beowulf* is what we are told in the history of the Danes at

¹⁶⁰ “Seldom anywhere a little while after the fall of a prince does the deadly spear rest, though the bride is good.”

the beginning of the poem.¹⁶¹ She is Halfdan’s daughter and “[On]ellan cwen, Heaðo-Scilfingas healsgebedda” (62b-63),¹⁶² but her marriage to Onela complicates the network of loyalties and feuds between the Danes, Geats and Swedes, as discussed in Chapter 3. The marriage between Onela and Halfdan’s daughter means that when the Geats attack the Swedes and side against Onela, they are attacking the brother-in-law of Hrothgar. Since the poet says nothing further about the alliance between the Danes and the Swedes and makes no second mention of Onela’s queen, it is hard to make anything of this fact. However there are a number of possibilities. Either Hrothgar’s sister was dead by this point and there was no longer an alliance between the Swedes and Danes, or Hrothgar was dead *and* his sister was dead, and Hrothulf and/or Hrethric were not particularly concerned about the Swedish alliance. There really is no way to tell.

In Modthryth’s case, there is a little more to go on. The digression begins directly after we are introduced to Hygd and are told how generous and wise she is. The poet then throws us straight into the Modthryth digression with no warning and no context. We know from the poem that:

Modþryðo wæg
 Fremu¹⁶³ ... firen ondrysne;
 nænig þæt dorste deor geneþan
 swæsra gesiða, nefne sinfrea,
 þæt hir on dægum eagum starede (1931b-1935).

[Modthryth vigorously carried on terrible deeds (such) that none of her own brave retainers dared to gaze on her by day with their eyes, except the great lord.]

¹⁶¹ See Chapter 2 for the Scandinavian analogue Yrsa/Ursa/Ursula, the wife/daughter of Helga and mother of Hrothulf.

¹⁶² “Onela’s queen, the Scylfing’s consort (or dear bedfellow).”

¹⁶³ The heated debate over the right name for Offa’s queen is a bit beyond the scope of my argument, but for the sake of convenience, and because I like it better, I will refer to her as Modthryth rather than Fremu, Thryth, Modthrytho, or any other variation thereof.

The poet then goes on to detail the unpleasant deaths she chooses for the men who *do* dare to look upon her, and we learn that:

Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw
idese to efnanne, þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy,
þætte freoðuwebbe feores onsæce
æfter ligetorne leofne mannan (1940b-1943).

[It was not such a queenly custom of women to perform, though she was peerless, that a peace-weaver deprive a beloved man of life after an insult.]

Modthryth is here an example of what a queen or peace-weaver should *not* be with her high-handed and deadly dealings among her own people. However we are told that her behavior changed completely when she was married “be fæder lare” (1950b)¹⁶⁴ to Offa and “ofer fealone flod...diðe gesohte” (1950a, 1951a)¹⁶⁵ where she became a reformed character, if we are to believe the poet’s claim that:

ðær hio syððan well
in gumstole, gode mære,
lifgesceafta lifigende breac,
hiold heahlufan wið hæleþa brego (1951b-1954).

[There she afterwards well enjoyed the living of life on the throne, famous for liberality, she held high love toward the lord of the warriors.]

It would seem that though the *sinfrea* (possibly, but not necessarily, her father) cannot or will not stop her from killing her retainers (who are most likely his as well), he is able to tell her to marry Offa with little to no resistance on her part. Most likely her lack of resistance was due to the *healufan* (1954a)¹⁶⁶ she held for him and the fact that he was “ealles moncynnes...selestan” (1955a, 1956a).¹⁶⁷ After that, the digression focuses solely on Offa and how he was such a magnificent king, how he was the ancestor of Eomer, and

¹⁶⁴ “By father’s bidding.”

¹⁶⁵ “Went on a voyage over the fallow flood.”

¹⁶⁶ “High love.”

¹⁶⁷ “The best of all mankind.”

likely Garmund and Hemming as well (1957b-1962). The digression, as Shippey notes, “reaches a high point of triumph and prosperity and then simply stops” (15) shifting back to Beowulf and his entrance into the hall.

It is possible that the *sinfrea* is a first husband, rather than Modthryth’s father. Shippey argues that “a natural explanation... would be that “Modthrytho” resents being looked at, and charges those who do it, falsely, with a form of sexual harassment, which her husband is prepared to punish by death” (15). Such an interpretation would explain the lord’s seeming unconcern or failure to prevent the deaths of his (most likely innocent) retainers. Shippey goes on to say that such an argument

seems the easiest explanation not only of the motive of (male) anger, but also the words *sinfrea*, *cwenlic*, *freoðowebbe*: if “Modthrytho” is already a queen, and a peaceweaver, that must mean she is married, and the great lord who *is* allowed to look at her must be her unnamed husband (ibid).

Her later marriage to Offa could easily be made possible by the death of her first husband – no stretch of the imagination given the frequency with which kings died in battle.

Klaeber argued that she was “a queen in her own right” (ibid), and Shippey says that, “Klaeber clearly would prefer the story be about a maiden who has all her unsuccessful suitors executed” (ibid). Given the lack of clarity in the identification of the *sinfrea*, and the lack of action on his behalf in stopping Modthryth from killing his retainers, I am inclined to believe that Modthryth did indeed have two husbands.

There are a few possible explanations of the purpose of the Modthryth digression. Malone suggests that Hygd “rejected Thryth as a model of behavior” and that “the necessary implication is that she not only weighed Thryth but also found her wanting” (“Hygd” 356). I do think the comparison to Hygd is deliberate, because of their pronounced differences in character before Modthryth’s reform, and then their marked

similarity afterwards. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles suggest in the commentary to Klaeber's *Beowulf* that Modthryth is "ostensibly introduced as a foil to the discreet, decorous, and generous queen Hygd" (222), which seems reasonable. I find this idea to be the most likely. Another possible point of comparison is between Grendel's mother and Modthryth. Damico says that "in contrast to Grendel's mother, who is an abstract rendering of the battle-demon, Modthrytho is a specific personage," and that there is "a distinct parallel drawn between the regal manslayer and the 'evil-ravager' Grendel's mother" (ibid). Damico takes the parallel one step further saying "there is, moreover an element of corruption connected with each character: the cryptic implication of incest in Modthrytho (the *sinfrea* may be her father), and the narrator's implicit condemnation of a moral corruption in Grendel's mother" (48). While this claim may be true (there is no evidence to the contrary, certainly), I find it easier to believe that the *sinfrea* is a previous husband than her father because of the motivations discussed above, and the fact that Grendel's mother is never tamed.

There are a number of possible analogues for Offa, and while I am fairly sure that the Offa of *Beowulf* is the Offa mentioned in *Widsith* as the ruler of the Angles, in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as the ancestor of Offa of Mercia, and possibly the Offa who fought the riverside battles in Aageson, Saxo and in the *Annales Reyleses* (Garmonsway 222-237) there is not enough evidence to say so definitively. Modthryth however has only two, and neither of them fit entirely. Both stories come from *The Lives of the Two Offas* (c. 1200) written about 200 years after the *Beowulf* manuscript. The first Offa is the king of the West Angles and son of Warmund, and he eventually marries the "much-wronged daughter of the King of York" and they have two sons (236).

The second analogue is the wife of Offa of Mercia who certainly shares temperaments with Modthryth before her reform. She is “lovely of face but shamefully wicked in mind” (Garmonsway 236), her name is Drida, and she is related to Charlemagne. However, unlike Modthryth, she never repents, and her marriage to Offa is not the glorious one the *Beowulf* poet paints for Offa and Modthryth. As Shippey says, “none of the parallels...[are] especially close, and ...the whole point of the episode remains opaque, surprisingly so in *Beowulf*, a poem whose ‘digressions’ ...can almost all be satisfactorily explained” (17). Modthryth is first not a proper queen, as all the others were, and she gets the closest thing to a happily ever after – at least as far as the *Beowulf* poet tells us.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have discussed the connections between Wealtheow, Hygd and Grendel’s mother and the “digressions” about Hildeburh, Modthryth and Freawaru, and the purposes they served in relation to the other peace-weavers. However, I think that the stories of the peace-weavers served another, collective purpose. As I mentioned briefly in the Introduction, I believe that the *Beowulf* poet was not critiquing his society, but rather observing it as it was. In the case of the peace-weavers, the good is the alliances and peace that they are able to bring. However, as we have seen, the collapse of an alliance sealed by the marriage of a peace-weaver often led to disasters as great as those that caused their necessity to begin with.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, peace-weavers have a very specific role in the society: *Beowulf* tells us that:

Hwilum mæru cwen,
Friðusibb folca flet eall geondhwearf,
Bædde byre geonge; oft hio beahwriðan
Secge (sealde) ær hie to setle geong (lines 2016-19).

[At times the illustrious queen, the peace-pledge of nations went all about the hall, urged on the young boys; often she gave a ring to a man before she went to her seat.]

While this speech exemplifies exactly what is expected of all peace-weavers, it also displays just how hopeless their cause usually is. They are the “peace-pledge of nations” but they are “to urge on” the young men and reward the warriors. Encouraging the young ones here most certainly means telling them they are destined for greatness which in this society equals prowess in battle; and rewarding the warriors for their feats in arms encourages them to perform more. Perhaps the poet speaks of the peace-weavers with a measure of fatalism because the culture has built failure into their tasks – after all, Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, Freawaru and Hygd all had husbands who inherited thrones through their fathers, but none of their sons will be able to retain them, for all men and all deeds will perish. It could be that the stories of these women and their fates are warnings of the futility of Beowulf’s actions: he may obey all of society’s rules, perform heroic deeds, and save people from monsters and feuds, but the dragon still awaits him

**Conclusion:
Beowulf is min nama**

Further Research and the “So What” factor

While I have covered a great deal in this discussion, there is still so much more that can be said, especially about Beowulf himself and his relationship to the historical world around him. Issues such as that of the Wægmunding’s connection to the Geats and to the Swedes are well worth exploring, but without a connection to real history, would have caused the focus of the paper to become too nebulous. So too the monsters deserve an equally in-depth discussion of their purpose and connection to Beowulf and to the histories.

As for why such a close study of the historical aspects of *Beowulf* was necessary at all, partly the goal was one of synthesis, both of the secondary source information and analogues in a way which Klaeber, Chambers and a myriad of others have done in a limited scope (for the sources) and Garmonsway has done (for the analogues). Also I wished to argue that the poem *Beowulf* is unified by the character of Beowulf, regardless of arguments of date, composition, number of authors and number of poems.

Beowulf the Hero

Though I have not discussed Beowulf himself at great length, he is indeed the thread that connects all these disparate strands of history together. He is a historical hero, not necessarily because he himself existed (in all likelihood he did not), but because he interacts with men such as Hygelac and Hengest, and peoples like the Danes, Swedes and Merovingians who did, and because the world he inhabits to is real. Aspects of the story such as his original refusal to rule the Geats after Hygelac’s death could be a result of the

poet working around the history he knew, dictating that Hrethric succeed Hygelac, but allowing for an unrecorded king after his death because the Geats were doomed to disappear from history.

The presence of Beowulf as a non-historical hero also allows for the presence of the monsters, allowing the poet to step outside of the realm of the strictly plausible into that of mythology and legend. The hero can fight monsters just as easily as he can fight Swedes, Frisians and Franks because he has one foot in the historical world, and one in the mythological. Because of the duel nature of Beowulf's character, the monsters can no more be dismissed than the histories any more than Ithaca and Troy can be separated from the Cyclopes and vengeful gods of *The Odyssey*, Fafnir and Attila the Hun from the story of Sigmund, Enkidu and Sumer from *Gilgamesh*.

If we scorn Beowulf's dragon and other monsters, we must reject too the monsters of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* because they also are about mythological or mytho-historical heroes who, while they lived in real places and interacted with real peoples, saw the gods and met fantastical beasts. It is, certainly, a different aesthetic focus than many today consider tasteful or pleasing, but as Tolkien says, "it does not seem plain that ancient taste supports the modern as much as it has been represented to do" and he has "the author of *Beowulf* at any rate on [his] side...and [he] cannot [him]self perceive a period in the North where on kind alone was esteemed: there was room for myth and heroic legend, and for blends of these" (Tolkien, *Monsters* 16). Simply because *we* as modern readers find the mater-of-factness with which monsters and historical figures coexist the known world to be odd, does not mean that the original audience would have.

Within the poem itself the poet (or poets) did not give history or monsters precedence over the other, it is a matter of balance in which the two parts worlds in tandem to give us the story of a hero who fought dragons, monsters, Swedes and Franks, and died as he had lived in “the named lands of the north”.

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